THE ORDEAL OF SILENCE

By a PEER

AUTHOR OF

"THE HARD WAY"

"TO JUSTIFY THE MEANS"

"THEO"

"A WIFE IMPERATIVE"

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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JOHN LONG, LIMITED, LONDON

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By

a Peer

AUTHOR OF THE NOVELS FACING THIS PAGE

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The Ordeal of Silence

CHAPTER I

"YET my idea is, Clive, that you will awake—rudely. A creeper will creep—a Standard rose grow to the sun. A man's a man, old chap—set in his niche in life—with his little scheme of colour to weave into the web of Creation."

"The Parrot Cry—the Parrot Cry." Clive Mainwaring's thin fingers struck irritably at the air. "A man — manhood — your little city-bred clerks — your puny, pasty-skinned server-out of velvets and silks. Men—men—obsessed by the word—kneeling to the God Sex. Bah!-it sickens me."

"And in their kneeling, taking to wife some anæmic girl of their own breed, living the thing they call life in four rooms behind a patch of sour earth—and yet—weaving their piece of life. Young shopmen and young shopgirls grow up in the little den they call home—slaved for, toiled for, until the parents drift out well satisfied. It is the world, Clive. You cannot alter it."

Old Clive Mainwaring frowned. "Nor wish to, Hume—in that way. Roland must marry. You are away from the point. But marry without that first pandering to his great manhood, without that evil squandering of youth, and in the pursuit of what men call pleasure. The boy knows nothing, yet he is per-

fectly happy. A fine rider, a good cricketer, a scholar —what more can he desire? "

"He may desire ordinary knowledge. You think your scheme, then, absolutely successful. He never leaves this monastery of yours. I tell you it's absurd."

"A good name for it. Never, without Basling or myself. And Basling is a man of steel. Roland has all that he wants here—in the Court. All he wants, I say."

June clothed the world in green; the trees were still untarnished in their youth, far from the heaviness of July. Great beeches laced their silver, tender masses of foliage against a cloudless sky. Horse chestnuts stood darkly arrogant, budding to flower. Painted sycamores, oaks, pluming larches, dark firs, massed in the distant woods. Here where the men sat, huge cedars spread. Rhododendrons flared in mass of pink and crimson and white. Laburnums hung their tassels in showers of gold; the white thorn was fluttering its petals down; but the scarlet and pink were brilliant in the heavy grass outside the sunk fence. Wigelia stretched long spikes of rosy-throated blossom. Syringa and lilacs drenched the air with scent. It was the hour of the wild, for the flower-beds were brown and bare, with all the little plants so dear to a gardener's soul growing tardily in the heat.

Mainwaring Court, a mass of heavy brown, stood dull behind them; a sparkling river leaped through the woods and ran silver across the park. Further off a course of artificial jumps had been put off for Roland to ride over.

Everything that youth could desire gathered behind the high walls of the demesne.

"He is my brother's son," old Mainwaring nodded gravely. "I swore that he should not suffer as I suffered from careless liberty. You have not been in the house yet. Men do all the housemaids' work. Old Mrs Harris—Roland's nurse—is the only woman. Basling has brought the boy up and it seems to me—" He paused.

"It seems to me," said Lord Hume, dryly, "that you are preparing the way for a very nice boy to come a most horrible cropper. To rush into life and marry the first cunning fool with a pretty face who is anxious to be milady—even if only as baronet's wife. It's all rot, Clive—and in your heart you must know it."

"You won't say a word to Roland," Mainwaring sat suddenly straight.

"What do you take me for?" grunted old Hume. "Lord! I only wish it could be true—this wrapping up of nature. But I'd rather see a son of mine, Clive, clean-lived and clean-minded (because he had power to turn away from the mire of life), as, thank God, many boys are and will be; than because he had been wrapped up in oil-silk and so that no splash could reach him."

"And as for marriage," Mainwaring frowned again. "That, too, is arranged. There is his cousin Agatha. He is to meet her soon. A particularly nice girl, carefully brought up—at home—no foreign schools. When Roland is twenty-one she is to come here and we will arrange the match."

"So, without knowing anything of life, he is to be married straight off to his cousin Agatha—to live as vegetable here all his days—rear a large and healthy family. Bah! What is this paragon maiden like?"

"Agatha's mother has just sent her photograph." Clive Mainwaring opened a big envelope.

The sun print of a vapid face—a girl with pointed chin and simpering mouth. Dull, probably obstinate; with a smattering of useful information—who had been taught to wrest a tune mercilessly from a piano, pedals used correctly; to paint a landscape in water-colours—to be girlish and demure.

A big, loose-limbed boy swung out of the French window of the library. Handsome, honest-eyed, with a firm, passionate mouth and wide forehead.

"Yes." Lord Hume looked humorously at the hasty bundling back of the photograph. "Yes. I see Roland's coming. He doesn't quite look the sort of boy, Clive, to marry an Agatha."

The boy was carrying a fluffy puppy, petting it and putting his face down to the little, sharp-toothed mouth.

"Do you imagine, with the country all round him, that the boy is quite a fool?" snapped Hume.

"It is all quite natural to him. He does not think of it. I will put this photograph away." He got up and went to the house.

"The man's mad," snapped old Hume, sharply. "Hallo! Roland boy, that's a nice pup."

"Duck's daughter, sir." Roland put the mite down, watching it worry his flannel trousers. "A little ripper, isn't it? Duck is my water-dog." Young Roland looked at the wide expanse of park—a wistful shade in his eyes. "You've come from London, sir?"

"Yes, from heat and rattle and glare," said Hume, carelessly. "A place to keep out of in summer-time, Roland—"

"One grows tired of eternal country though"—the boy's eyes grew more wistful—"of life inside a ring fence."

"Yes," said Hume, softly, nodding his head wisely.

"I shall be of age in a day or two," said Roland, "and then—" He smiled. "We play cricket to-morrow, sir—against the village club. I wish you'd bowl for us."

"Among a lot of boys," laughed Hume—"an old fogey like myself."

"I hear you have a wonderful leg break," said Roland, gravely. "We make all the gardeners and grooms play. Shall we go to see the ground? It's by the front gates. Or shall we wait—it's some way off."

"Distances in country places are always distressing," said Hume. "We'll— Hallo! What's that? A motor—coming here."

A motor gliding up the long avenue, with flutter of feminine veils in the sunshine. A small, green car throbbing to the swing-gates, and a young fellow in a dark suit jumping out and coming quickly towards them.

"Eve has come into Eden," said Hume, resignedly, looking back at the sombre old house and laughing to himself. "Who can it be, Roland?"

"We had better see. No one ever comes here." Roland walked to meet the man. The veilings and motor bonnet fluttered about in the car.

The stranger lifted his hat.

"It's petrol. We're just out and don't know where to get any. So we drove up to beg from you."

"Fortunately my car is here, and I have plenty of

spirit. Roland, will you ask my man for some? " said Hume, politely.

But Roland had gone nearer the swing-gate, looking shyly at a pretty face framed by the flutter of veil and straw bonnet. The girl spoke to him at once.

" Yes, we ran right out of spirit. Isn't it dreadful? " A highly-pitched little voice rose from the gate. " My brother and I are motoring to stay with my aunt, and we came round this way to see the sea and got lost, and we're so tired and dusty."

Roland's straw hat remained on his head. The high education of man had never been his; but he came nearer to reassure the damsel in distress.

" We'll get you the petrol," he said boyishly. " And I say, you're miles from anywhere. Tea is coming out—you must have some."

The girl in the car laughed gaily. It was not a well-bred laugh, but her beauty toned it down.

" Well—that is nice of you," she said, watching a procession of butler and footmen. Tea—and a thunderous vision hastening out behind it. Clive Mainwaring had caught sight of the veil and bonnet at the swing-gate. No one came to the Court. The gates were always locked. But to-day one was being repaired.

Mainwaring was followed by Basling, the tutor, a thin, narrow-faced man, dogmatic, conscientious, horribly learned. Chosen carefully from half a hundred applicants. Made in man's semblance, he was a piece of nature too well washed, ironed to a mere grey shadow of his dim boyhood. A cramping guide for youth, who drove learning itself along the smoothest, dullest roads, with no side-glances for the romance of history, but with

great love for science and dates and mathematics and dry facts which were nothing more.

"Hume!" Old Mainwaring came quickly across the shaven lawns. "Hume! How has this happened?"

"A stray motor—friend. The inevitable serpent in Eden. Roland has asked her to take tea. You must confirm it. There is no escape."

The girl fluttered some of her veils aside; came, in coquettish consciousness of youth and beauty, swinging rounded hips, flashing her light blue eyes, patting out her foolish high-heeled shoes. Was she not Femina regnant among four males?

One measured her as she came, with his cynical, worn eyes. A Londoner, who hovered on the fringes of Society, and probably lived in Cheyne Gardens; who talked of the Season, and fluttered round it, since the inner suck of the whirlpool would never draw her in; whose table was littered with Society papers.

A little, vapid, foolish piece of humanity, full of impressing these denizens in far Devon.

"We were doin' a week's tour," she explained again, "in this new motor. I was not well; and we lost our way, an' used up our spirit and spirits." This was a joke, accented lest it should be lost. "I am Miss Darcy Browne, and this is my brother. It's really very kind to give us tea."

"I am delighted." Old Mainwaring's voice rang stiffly. "Roland, I think it your hour for study. Is it not, Basling?"

"No, sir," said Roland, coolly. "Never, at tea-time."

The butler laid the massive silver; the tea was neither hot nor good.

Bread and butter; blameless sponge-cakes were placed on the big table. Nothing to charm eye or senses, even in cakes; but hot toast in honour of Lord Hume.

"It's very pretty here." Miss Darcy Browne took chilly tea gladly, looking carelessly at the tiers of blossom, showers of gold, flare of scarlet, cream and pink. She wore a bunch of pink roses fastened into her belt.

Did not Clive Mainwaring, looking at it, ever wonder how puny his efforts were to exclude beauty from his home?

Lord Hume talked pleasantly; there was an air of constrained effort upon the afternoon. His eyes twinkled gaily. This sprite flung from the lap of chance had stricken the fairy godfather dumb.

Young Roland watched the pretty thing as one takes one's first look at something strangely new. He looked at her waved, shining hair, her slightly powdered cheeks; he smelt the heavy scent on her handkerchief; saw her skin beneath her lace blouse; and to him she was wonderful in her beauty.

As Miss Darcy Browne found she took tea with peer and baronet, she drank it even more slowly. She ate little, so that she might roll "lord" often on her tongue, and use "Sir Roland" the oftener.

Her brother was less easily impressed, being older and a little cleverer; he talked to Roland when he could.

Hume held out his heavy gold cigarette-case to Miss Browne.

"You smoke—of course—" he said, gravely polite.

"If no one minds. Some old cats are shocked,

y'know. But everyone does nowadays, don't they? " she chattered, smiling coyly, glad to be recognized as Smart.

" Everyone," he said impressively, " that *is* anyone. There are a few foolish, old-fashioned women left."

Trixie Darcy Browne lighted the strong Egyptian deftly. The name fitted her as a good glove. The froth of her conversation grew more light and merry. She hoped she would see Lord Hume again in " Town." He must lunch with them. " And you, Sir Roland—when you are up." She turned to Roland.

" I have never been to London," he said, boyishly grave.

" Never—been to Town! Oh, Sir Roland! Never seen theatres and dined out? Oh, what a *lot* you have before you," she gushed.

The boy's cheeks flushed a little.

Miss Trixie showed no disposition to go. She chattered to Hume. A beauty was discussed and Miss Darcy Browne disapproved. " Pretty," she said, " but rather in a housemaid's style," — this very airily.

" What style is that? " said Roland, looking at her with the same wondering, open admiration.

" Oh, Sir Roland! " she laughed. " Don't you know your own housemaids? "

" We have none," he said, looking faintly puzzled.

" Sakes alive! " said Miss Darcy Browne, forgetting her company.

" No, there are men for everything here," he frowned in wonder.

" Is—he—a little—er—" whispered Miss Trixie to

Hume, and tapping her pretty hair, " and is that why he never goes—away? "

" No; I think it is his uncle who is a little—er—" said Hume, dryly. " Roland is all there."

" He doesn't seem to know *anything*," said Miss Darcy Browne, getting up. Usual thanks ever so much —usual regrets as to a visitation, etc. etc. Pressing invitations to elderly Lord Hume. No. 500 Cheyne Gardens—not so far down— Perhaps he knew a friend of her mother's—Lord Cranthage? No? But Trixie had produced her title cleverly. " And Sir Roland, do call on mother. Let us know when you come up."

" Do, old chap," from Lancelot, the brother. " You might dine with me—and we'd do a theatre. Glad to see you any time."

" I shall be delighted," he said, shyly formal. " I shall indeed, Mr—er—Darcy Browne."

The flutter of veils dimming the fresh girlish beauty —the new-fed Rover throbbing into life—a cloud of dust on a long smooth avenue—and the strangers were gone.

But Roland stood at the swing-gates watching them go. Trixie had dropped her roses.

Clive Mainwaring gnawed at his lips angrily.

" It is too bad," he said, " too bad—a girl of that class, too."

" The kind of young woman," said Hume, quietly, " whom Roland sees in a haze of glory. He carries no shield of experience against such cheap weapons, Clive. Bah! His upbringing cannot be wise."

" Agatha will wipe the memory of this girl away. But—I wanted him to see her first—to let her be perfection to the boy."

Roland stood still at the swing-gate; the dying hum of the motor was taking some part of his mind away. Against the evening sunlight, against tasselled gold and banks of cream and pink and scarlet, he saw a flutter of veils, saw burnished hair, red lips and soft white skin, smelt the heaviness of Violette de Parma. The trees ceased suddenly to be a scheme in a picture which came naturally in the end of May—they glowed with new colours, took deeper shades—the west wind was no longer a mere air—it touched him with a strange caress, waking sex to life.

Outside those walls was the world. He had always meant to see it for himself, but now it took form, was a different thing. A place peopled with fluttering veils and pink and white pretty faces.

"Chtt—chtt!" said Hume to himself. "Is a man mad to try to make monk of boy, and a monk who is to wed decorously—to take a wife lest even worse befall him."

Roland left the swing-gate and strolled back. How old his uncle looked, sitting in the sunlight. He had never noticed it before. Old and pinched and very pale. Lord Hume was straight and brown and well preserved—a young man for fifty-two. And Basling—with a faint smile Roland likened him suddenly to a grey shadow, a bloodless book of knowledge. He sat quiet, thinking, while his uncle fumed and fretted.

They dined at seven; the lamps in the big library were already lighted. A sombre, brown-hued room, one side lined with books. Hume's eyes twinkled again, gently. Always the same note—lack of colour—almost austere plainness.

Pictures—but only landscapes—and those copies or

prints—decorous groups of trees and water. Animals—but few of them. Prints of Peter Graham's grey distances and wild cattle. Groups of flowers. No smiling faces pictured on canvas—nothing to make a boy think.

Hume passed Roland's bedroom and looked in. It was austere as a monk's cell. A bath in one corner—there were no bathrooms in the house—a narrow iron bed—a few prints of Landseer's pictures.

"The colt that is hardest held has the hardest mouth at the last," hummed Hume, as he dressed for dinner.

A short and somewhat uninteresting meal. White soup, trout, then a dish for Hume alone—cutlets on a vast silver platter. The others were eating some mixture of egg.

"No meat?" he said, in amazement.

"Roland has never eaten meat. And we keep him company. Here in the country he is better without it."

"Oh, thanks!" said Hume to himself. "More monkish ways. More nonsense of its class."

Heavy and dull after dinner. Roland and his tutor played piquet, Hume studied the books—with every work of romance and colour struck out. Dry histories, works of travel filling the shelves. Hume shrugged his shoulders and went out into the sweet summer night. There was a bite of chill in it, below the starlit sky—dew fell heavily; but under the rustic pagoda of roses it was dry, and Hume sat down. The scented heads gave out their fragrance to the night—as they would never do to day—coy women who loved their sombre wooer.

He saw Roland get up. Then the boy joined

him; the curtains were open, showing the lighted room.

"How sweet the roses are," he said, pulling up a chair. "You won't take cold, sir?"

"I'm a hardy old boy, Roland. Not I!"

"Yes. Uncle Clive is afraid of the night air. What was that? Was it a motor?"

"A bumbling beetle, I think, Roland." Hume hid a smile.

"Oh, so— Yes! I thought those people might have got lost again and come back—"

The boy pulled at a rose-bud. "How sweet they are," he said again. "I've never smelt them so before."

"No—you would not," said Hume, dryly, and yet uneasily.

"Lord Hume"—Roland's voice faltered a little—"why—does my uncle keep me here so closely? Why do we—see no one?"

By no one read girls in fluttering veils, with brightened hair and powdered cheeks, thought Hume to himself. Aloud he spoke very gently.

"He—your uncle—has curious ideas, Roland. There are evil people out in the world. He wants you to be a Bayard, boy—*sans peur et sans reproche.*"

Hume was choosing his words slowly, uncertain of where he stood.

Roland moved into the moonlight, the silver light falling on his dark strong face; he smiled faintly.

"Bayard was not a knight shut up in a ring of stones," he said musingly. "If it is wrong to pick flowers, sir, and a man is put upon a bare road where none grow, then there is no credit to him to leave them

alone. I am tired of this life, but—" He smiled again. "Oh, it will soon be over."

Had they told him then of his carefully arranged marriage? Some men invite confidence. Young Roland had met sympathy and knew it.

"When I am of age," he said quietly, "I am going away. To London—Paris—perhaps further—to see for myself what the world is like. To see—alone."

"You have not told your uncle," almost gasped Hume.

"No. I shall tell him on the evening of my twenty-first birthday. Not until then."

Hume sat up, gripping the arms of the wooden seat. This boy to go out into the world, a fledgling who had never learned to fly. A pigeon who would not know the meaning of a hawk's swoop. Who would take gilt for gold—paint and powder for dewy freshness. The madness of Sir Roland's training would soon be proven.

"Look here, old chap," he said lightly, carefully, speaking as from man to man. "That's right, I think; but will you come to me? I've rooms up in Town. I'll show you round. Introduce you to some men. Do my best for you."

Roland made no answer. Hume, quick to think, saw the difficulty. The boy feared another prison.

"You'll be free as air," he said, almost sharply. "It's only when you do go out you'd better meet your own people. Come—give an old fellow the pleasure of thinking he can help his cousin's son."

"Oh, I'll come," said Roland, blushing now. "It's more than good of you, sir." He stretched his arms out a little, as a man who throws off fetters. "Lord! I shall be glad to see things for myself," he said, almost eagerly.

"As you ought to have done years ago." Hume checked himself. "Come, let us go in." They strolled to the close library; a fire crackled on the low hearth. Clive Mainwaring crouched over it, looked chilled and ill.

A dull evening—and one of so many to this boy. The cards put away; tasks set for the morning; all mapped out carefully. Hume read the paper. A swim at six—in summer in the lake; in winter in the warmed swimming-bath. Dumb-bell exercises; then a gallop in the park for an hour. Breakfast; then lessons—few now, for Sir Roland was almost a man.

The servants filed in for prayers—read by Basling—one old woman, kindly, wrinkled, a lace cap hiding her thin parting, among the crowd of men. Mr Basling read rapidly and without fervour. The prayers were so well known, one for each day, that the amens came partly with mechanical ease.

"Good-night, uncle. Good-night, Mr Basling. Good-night, sir." Sir Roland swung out, lithe and light and active; but Hume had watched him at his prayers and saw he held a pink rose in his fingers, looking into its glowing heart—smelling it—and now as he left he carried it still.

CHAPTER II

SLEEP was uneasy at Mainwaring Court once six was clanged out by an echoing bell in the yard. Then housemaids moved clumsily, clattering brooms and pails.

Bells tabulated Roland's morning—one pealed for his swim—another to mark the coming of his horse.

Lord Hume, coming down the darkly-carpeted staircase, went to the door to watch for the boy. The drawing-room opened to his right. A noble room, but drably sombre, heavily handsome—the very china must be sexless. No simpering Dresden shepherdess held baskets of delicate flowers in her dimpled arms. There were vases, heavy, and some priceless. Bits of good Wedgwood, gaudy splendour of Worcester, and Crown Derby, delicate flowers of Lowestoft—all ranged tastelessly on heavy tables and cabinets.

Some water-colour landscapes broke the expanse of the walls. Hume's lips curled a little. What folly it all was. Since the pendulum of youth's mind swings to extremes, would not this boy, once loosed, bathe himself in meretricious colour and garish effects—stand breathless before studies of the nude—hurry to see those things which would have been mere everyday life to him, if they had been about his house? And since they had been hidden from him, would he not see evil where it was not, and think the pictured beauty of woman, not God's greatest gift, but a snare of the eye?

He heard voices outside.

"Good-morning, then, Hill. I will not ride again to-day."

"Good-morning, Sir Roland."

How well the boy sat his horse. Easily, lithely, with life and vigour in every movement, hands light yet firm on the reins as he played with his thoroughbred's mouth. A beautiful bay thing, nervous and yet gentle, turning to rub his velvet nose on Roland's hands when his rider dropped off.

The breakfast-room was not in the morning sunshine. It was a big, dark room, with high windows—all carefully shut to the sweet morning air.

Breakfast had the same note of monkish abstinence—toast and butter, boiled eggs. Some bacon, congealing whitely on a silver dish for Hume.

Roland ate his brown bread hungrily—he drank milk. The idea was absurd, this lengthening out of childhood. Lord Hume frowned at it. Milk! Would not the next thing be claret and peaches, simply to try the contrast?

Roland came of age next day. Clive Mainwaring, looking pinched and worn, was restless and uneasy. Arches, of drunken tendencies, were being put up across the swing-gate. A display of bunting had been ordered from London.

"Roland"—Clive Mainwaring cleared his throat, fidgeting with the morsel of dry toast on his plate—"Roland, to-morrow you will be your own master. Free to leave this and go to your own houses, should you wish to. A man, Roland, living, I hope, to thank me for the careful seclusion of your youth."

"I hope so, sir." Roland looked at his uncle with

the curious, almost awkward gravity which enveloped him.

"And we must make changes here—now. Emerge from our shell, my boy, and see the world. So to-day"—old Mainwaring hemmed as if he had something in his throat—"your distant cousins, Lady Cosway and her daughter Agatha, come for this great occasion."

"Her daughter!" Roland started. "A—girl—uncle?"

"Her eldest daughter, Roland. Yes, a young girl."

Lord Hume had started a pipe and puffed it thoughtfully.

"A girl!" Roland thought of fluttering veils, of scent of violets, of the soft bloom of delicate pink powder, and without realizing it, associated this newcomer with them.

"She, Lady Cosway, Ruth, has been anxious to pay me a visit." Mainwaring need not have taken such pains with his scheme of words, for Roland as yet had no idea of what it meant. "And this is the chance. I should like to see Dawes, Basling—there will be menus to arrange."

Roland fidgeted a little. "Are they going to stay long, Uncle Clive?"

"Stay long? Oh, a week—ten days. Then Lady Cosway has asked us to go there. She is not far from Ascot. We shall attend the races. No doubt enclosure tickets will be procurable."

This broke across Roland's scheme of liberty. He merely nodded his dark head. He had fixed up the next night to speak, and a certain tenacity of purpose made him hold to his plan. Then, Uncle Clive must see to his visitors. He would endure a week and no more.

"Perhaps you would not care to work to-day, Roland?"

Some note in the tutor's voice struck the boy. Roland looked at him. A grey, bloodless automaton, yet there was a new look in the tired, grey eyes, set in their nest of heavy wrinkles.

Basling had been there for twelve years. Roland did not dream it possible that this grey man had a mother and supported her. Two hundred a year, divided, does not go far—the savings in the bank were piteously small, and a new place hard to find. The ring-fence had hugged Mark Basling about, his exit from it would be to a bleak-eyed world, it's head held aside. And it was not all that—the grey man had grown to love the boy he taught, to sorrow for the madness of Clive Mainwaring's orders. The love of women had been outside his own life, but the certainty of its coming was marked on the strong young face, and Basling deplored the atmosphere of the monastery.

Once he remonstrated—nervously. "If he is to marry, Mr Mainwaring, would it not be better to relax a little, to let Roland gather a little knowledge from good romances—to—let us read—"

"Certainly not, Basling. He will pass from this house with a pure young wife and walk blamelessly at her side through life."

"I—think we'll tackle that piece of science." Roland slipped his hand through his tutor's arm. Coming emancipation made him bold.

"It—will be—our last tackle, eh, Roland?"

"Who knows?" The boy's eyes grew thoughtful. "You are not leaving, sir?"

"Oh, yes. Mr Mainwaring has told me to go. He does not want me any more—naturally."

" Oh! " Roland laid the intricate paper down, staring at nothing. " You've got another place—someone else to teach then? "

" It's not so easy nowadays, Roland. I'm old, you see. No, I have none."

" Oh! " said Roland again. And then—" Well, we'll see, Mr Basling. I—may want more lessons in science next year."

" My mother—" began Basling, nervously.

" Your mother! " Youth is unconsciously cruel. That this old man should have a mother alive! Astonishment was all too plainly painted on Roland's face. " You've got a mother? "

" It is a law of Nature," said Basling, a little dryly. " And I am not quite Methuselah, Roland."

A forbidden name has slipped out. The Old Testament, save the Psalms, was a closed book at the Court. The exquisite story of the New was learnt, but the Old strictly forbidden.

" Methuselah! " said Roland—" I don't know him. Look here at this tough bit."

The old Court woke from its long sleep. The evergreen arch rose to a waggling triumph. The gardeners despoiled the houses, reft of rich blooms of rose and carnation to deck the drab drawing-room. Old silver was brought and polished. The great rooms, big and gloomy, were aired and brightened with flowers. The man cook wrestled glumly with a cookery-book, the placid tenour of his simple cooking broken.

Luncheon for the tenants was ordered from London, but he must strive with " ontrays " and fish and savouries—and strove ill-humouredly.

At five the big horses' hooves rang on the dusty

avenue and the landau came into sight, and the white dust veil following it.

Roland was on the terrace waiting. Waiting for a flutter of light veils, for buckled shoes and bright, coquettish eyes. The type which he had stamped upon him yesterday.

Lady Cosway looked up at the dull brown house. "What a sarcophagus," she said to herself, but her tongue was tuned to sweet speeches. Sir Roland Mainwaring was very rich—and would be richer. There was a manor in Scotland, a lodge in Connemara, two houses in England, one in London, and all this had been impressed on the demure girl at her side.

"Your simplest dresses, Agatha, my dear—they have lived so quietly there."

Brown-eyed Agatha knew perfectly well what she was brought down for. She commented aloud to her glass, with a directness which would have astonished her large mother.

"He's never seen a girl. Help! What a young fool he will be. Of course he will fall straight in love with me. And he will bore me dreadfully. I would like to marry Tony, but then if you've enough money you can do everything. And Tony has none."

Ruth Cosway was large and smooth, and well preserved. A careful maid carried the electric battery which kept wrinkles at bay; her make-up was poetically done. Her *toupet* a study. She was a grasping, unscrupulous woman, whose children were brought up with a care which stamped most of their apparent individuality from them. Yet Agatha and Annette held conversations which would have astonished their parents. Neither books nor papers were locked up at Cosway Castle.

"My dear Clive, this is perfectly delicious of you, to ask us down like this. Dear Agatha has been quite excited."

The landau decanted the big, smooth woman at the steps; going up them she came straight to the group on the terrace.

Roland drew a quick breath. No flutter of veils or whiff of perfume and wearing of flowers. A demure girl with round light brown eyes, plump, and with promise of heaviness. Very plainly dressed in light brown with a plain hat framing a somewhat dusty face.

"And—Roland, my dear boy. How like your mother. This is Agatha, Roland."

"How do?" said Lady Agatha, a little woodenly.

"How do you do?" The chill note of disappointment crept into Roland's voice. He missed the flutter, the scents, the eyes. The love of the first type of maidenhood he had seen was stamped upon him.

Agatha stood quite still, a picture of stolid, fresh young girlhood, typically blameless and pure. Behind her light brown eyes her thoughts were galloping.

"He is very handsome. And doesn't look like a fool. I'd better make up my mind to him. I'm sure he wouldn't be bad."

"Will you have some tea, Lady Agatha?"

"Cousin Agatha, please." Lady Cosway had pulled off her gloves and was looking uneasily at the sponge-cake. "Cousins, my dears— No thank you, Clive. If I might have a sandwich—a petit four. Something small."

Clive Mainwaring was "distressed." A hurried order for sandwiches produced a plate of six, cut thickly and spread with wedges of potted meat.

Lady Cosway ate some sponge-cake languidly.

Roland put down Agatha's tea—she took sponge-cake willingly—the slice was thick and sweet. He sat down and Hume smiled. Roland did not know how to make conversation. Little Trixie Darcy Browne had made it herself. Roland looked critically at the tight brown bodice, at Agatha's big, rather red hands, and heavy feet, in their sensible thick shoes.

"Do you ride, Cousin Agatha?" he said at last.

"Oh, sometimes, Roland." She dropped the cousin. "Mother does not keep a horse for me—I'd like to, of course."

"Yes." Roland fell into a new silence, from which Lord Hume relieved him.

The subjugation by the mere fact of sex was not proceeding satisfactorily, and the old man's eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Now, Mrs Martin will show you your rooms. And then a stroll in the gardens," said Clive Mainwaring.

Lady Cosway would rest—she was tired. "Dear Agatha would love a run."

Agatha brushed the dust from her smooth thick skin, changed her brown, tight dress for something light and came back to the terrace.

She looked hard into the big, old-fashioned glass; shuddered at the heavily furnished room. She and Annette had sat up late the night before talking of Roland. He had never seen a girl. He was to fall down simply in worship, ending in honourable marriage. Agatha wanted to see him fall, for her brief life had been spent among youths who were more wooed than wooing.

"He'll never be like Tony," demure Agatha had chattered. "Never, Ansie."

"But, think of all the places, Ag. And you can have Tony to stay," said sapient fifteen.

"To stay!" Eighteen was wiser. "It would be the same, you know. He'd have to go away again. But no, mother wants it—"

She came peering, curious, down the wide stairs. Pretty, because she was young. A mixture of innocence and precocious wisdom.

"I suppose there are heaps of diamonds and things," said Lady Agatha to herself as she ate one of Tony's chocolate creams. He kept her well supplied.

"Show Agatha the gardens, Roland, and the lake. Do not be late for dinner." The match-making was not delayed.

Roland got up, unwillingly. Looked at Lord Hume in mute, boyish entreaty. He was not ready for this sudden squiring of a demoiselle. He was uneasy—afraid of the lumpy girl in white. Hume shook his head—slightly.

Out of sight of the terrace Agatha brightened. The conquest was about to begin. Out of sight of elders meant gay giggles—her hand held—she had the crude instincts of her sex without any true knowledge.

Was Roland worshipping already? He was looking at her with a curious, half-critical glance.

"You've been shut up—always, haven't you?" the girl questioned. "Never been anywhere?"

"Always," he said. She was not so alarming.

"How funny! What did they do it for, I wonder? How you'll love to get away—to London—and Paris."

When love is in the question it is never good for the woman to feel superior, and Agatha did. She told him condescendingly of London and its joys—theatres,

pictures—" streets one mustn't wait in—that is late— " she said.

Roland held a narrow gate open. He was shy, ill at ease. Why should this girl know so much more than he? It was not right—or fair. Soon—his lips set—he would know more than she did. Oh, very soon. He had been warned to open gates even for his old nurse, as she was a woman. But he was afraid of ridicule, blushed at Agatha's careless " Oh, don't bother."

" Isn't it awfully dull, shut in here?—Oh, that's pretty! " She squeezed Roland up against the gate, put her hand close to his. Tony would have known what to do. But the hand was red and rather big—the only other girl's hands which Roland had seen were white—fluttering from deep lace frills, their nails rosy and polished.

" Isn't it pretty, Roland? " Agatha wanted the conquest to begin. She must write of it to Annette. Get it all over since it must be. It would be nice to be married, with one's own house and heaps of dresses and jewels. Mamma had told her to expect it. She squeezed closer. " Aren't you glad we came down to see you? "

" Oh, of course," he said, redder than ever. The warm contact thrilled him vaguely, but with no thought for the girl who caused the thrill. " It is very nice. And I hope it won't be dull—for you."

" Oh, no." Agatha peered up at the strong, dark face. " No." Then she yawned—because she wanted Tony out in the wood. Lately it had been difficult to get alone with him. She moved away, questioning Roland closely. What a story for Annette! Roland had never read a novel! Agatha giggled with superiority.

" Oh, I say. It is too bad. Look here, I've got two with me. Beauties. I'll slip round with them to you. One's lovely. Annette and I bought it at the bookstall. Behind it, you know— It's one of Sue Roper's books. I read the first." Then Agatha pulled up. She must not let her tongue run fast.

" I'll lend it you," she said. " Come, we must not be late. Tell me, Roland—is it true that you never saw a girl before—"

" Oh, no," he said. " I saw one yesterday." His eyes were dark with regret.

" Oh-h! " Agatha was disappointed. " Was she pretty? "

" Pretty! What is that? " he asked, puzzled. " She was not a bit like you, Cousin. Small and "— he paused—" all pink and white and blue-eyed—and fluttery. It is so stupid," he added, " to have been shut up here."

" Oh," said Agatha, blankly. " And not like me," she came in with a sense of injury.

The dulness of a game of Bridge with two men learning it nearly drove Lady Cosway crazy. She yawned and fidgeted and paid with an ill grace.

Agatha wore white—becoming her years but not her skin. Vivid blues or greens were wanted to light her dull fairness; her arms were red and fat. She sat and ate studiously, saved by inexperience and healthy hunger from her mother's dismay at the attempts of the man cook. Vegetarian cookery had destroyed his skill. His " ontrays " reeked of onions. His roast was sodden. His chickens bathed in green-spotted, sticky flour and milk.

Roland ate meat, almost for the first time, drank a

glass of light claret, and, light as it was, it ran quicksilver through his young blood.

As women will, Ruth Cosway consoled herself with futurity. How she would alter, make this old hole livable in. Dismiss the men—slay the cook with biting sarcasm edged by her indigestion. Agatha must make haste. Tame, handsome Roland would not cross his uncle—but would marry as he was bid.

The young people might run out into the cool. Lady Cosway raised irritated eyes from her partner's murder of the good hand she had laid him down.

"Oh, yes. Do let's." Agatha flung over the draught-board with an awkward lunge of relief.

Soft wooing airs—the silver charm of this May night—with thorn and syringa, clover and lilac and laburnum and roses bathing the gentle wind in scents.

"Shall we sit here?" Roland pulled a chair out on the terrace. He was dreamy, sunk in sheer wonder. Women, rulers of the world since they are rulers of great men, had been sprung on him so quickly that he was dazed. First Trixie Darcy Browne, then this rounded cow-like girl, who looked at him so curiously.

The girl sat awkwardly, her sturdy knees apart, her arms upon them. She was still a fledgeling—half wiseacre and half fool.

The light of the moon kissed her warm flesh to delicate whiteness; showed the round column of her throat, hid the coarse outlines of her arms.

Desire was born in Roland, but not for her. She was the element, the vision which had passed, was the matter . . . this girl was too much part of the calm healthiness of his own life, too solid and pure and unalluring, toning with the fresh country he

had lived in. The pendulum of youth swung fast to the extreme. He hungered for the dainty colouring which was not of nature, for the heavy violet scent, the flutter and cheap fascination of Miss Darcy Browne.

Agatha yawned. Tony would have known what to do and say out there in the dimness. Chairs pushed back into the shadows . . . smothered giggles . . . little thrills of contact, innocently natural and delightful. A kiss on her bare neck, on her soft red lips. A whisper from this great god Man—though but a subaltern of the line of a future, holding wondrous unthought-of joys if they two could wed. Tony had looked into books sealed even to prying Agatha and Annette. Tony could walk alone in London, was wrapped about by the mystery of knowledge.

But this—this handsome boy who stared at her sheepishly—who must yet be her husband.

He broke the silence suddenly. "It is so strange," he said. "Until yesterday I had never seen a girl. None of the men have wives. I have never left the park. Then yesterday, the stranger—to-day, you! It's all too bad, I think."

Agatha giggled. She could not think of anything else to do. And the giggle jarred. She pushed her chair back into a patch of shadow, waiting for Roland to follow.

"There is not even a picture of one in the house," he said. "I think sometimes my uncle must be mad."

"You'll see heaps of girls when you come to us," said Agatha. "Too many, all about."

"Your mother wants me to visit you?" he asked. He was in mental dark, groping, stirred by sex but not by her.

"Oh, yes," said Agatha, briskly. "We have fun, Roland, up in our wing. Pillow fights, and sometimes

suppers in the old gallery at twelve o'clock. Mother's playing Bridge downstairs. Oh, if she knew, of course —there'd be ructions."

Pillow fights—midnight suppers! Roland frowned, offended without knowing why.

"We'll have great fun," she said, with childish friendliness. "So you must come."

"It's strange," he said, "that you have never come here before." And then—his uncle's voice rose from the library.

"You do not think it ill-advised, Ruth. Ought not Mr Basling or Hume go out to them?"

"Now—how can it matter? My dear Clive—oh, don't, don't trump the best 'club.'"

With these words knowledge came to Roland—the whole plot bared to him. He laughed suddenly—aloud. He was to be married to this lumpy girl—and gain his liberty with her. Marriage—he knew that married people were always together, lived in one house, had sons and daughters. And—he had no desire to live in one house with Lady Agatha—to see her dull skin and round brown eyes always before him. So this was it. There was virtue in wedding. His uncle had preached of it often; spoke of matrimony as man's proper estate; talked of the sweet companionship of wives to the boy who knew one woman—his old nurse.

"What—did you laugh at?" Agatha asked, startled.

"At an idea," he said.

She came out into the moonlight then. Big, sturdy, healthy. A future mother of strong sons and daughters, something in her nearness, her amplitude of bare arms and white neck made the boy hot and half-ashamed. Dreaminess fell on him. He had been obedient from his babyhood. If they told him to marry this girl—it

might be all right. When he came back from travelling he might do it.

"Oh, that book, Roland." Agatha fumbled in an embroidered bag—her mother made her do a piece of work, which had lasted now for many years.

"It looks well," said Lady Cosway, "to see girls industrious."

"Here," she said, "this is a splendid book. We bought it to-day, an' I read it all coming down. Mother never notices."

Covered in royal blue—a maiden of impossible loveliness set in an oval band of gold on the picture. Red wavy hair framing an oval face, great blue eyes, scarlet lips. A lovely, sensual, vacant face, white-skinned, pink-cheeked. Inside there were other pictures, where Erminie, the heroine, trailed her pictured length of ten feet nothing—it was honestly as much—across several stirring situations. A book such as girls love, with froth of chiffon, glitter of colour, deep sentiment on its pages. And yet the writer had a trick of commanding attention—there was a current of passion which was real, the scenes bore a strange stamp of reality; the host of worthless characters knew how to love.

Roland took it, meaning to put it away unread, slipped it into his pocket and asked Agatha to go in. A tray with sandwiches and cakes brought her healthy appetite into new being, she sat munching happily, sipping lemonade.

It was time for children to go to bed. Good-night, Uncle Clive. Good-night, mamma, etc. etc.

"It will really suit admirably." Clive Mainwaring drank barley-water, his thin old face alive with interested happiness. "A charming, healthy, childlike girl. A credit to her mother, Ruth."

" Is there no higher thought in him than their suitability as a pair of healthy animals? " Hume turned impatiently to the grey-faced tutor. " Are we not on a higher plane? Does he think that dull girl will make a boy of Roland's temperament happy? Even be a companion to him? "

" Mr Mainwaring looks upon women as mere means to an end," said Basling, quietly. " He could not contemplate the possibility of one being an intelligent companion."

" Because he wasted his youth on mere pretty faces and rounded limbs," said Hume, impatiently. " Sowed acres of wild oats, and now expects this nephew to be content with blameless, useful cabbage. Because he never knew a true woman, Basling, but only the little pirates of the sea, who must live on spoil and the youth of man. Poor souls—when age tatters their sails, and makes their fingers slow on the helm, so that the prey escapes—what must life be then to them? "

Mr Basling's cheeks grew faintly indigo. It was his compass of a blush. But he was wise below his mark of grey. He knew of the seething underworld, even if he had never walked down the lighted steps which led to it.

" Yes," he said, gently, " there are women who can be friends, Lord Hume,—there was my mother and my father."

" Ay, indeed there are." Hume dropped his head. He thought of one, grey-eyed, sweet-lipped, who had drifted across his life. With every thought in common, a woman a man's soul could turn to for sympathy when passion passed. One—one—to him a memory of sunny days, in London, in the country—with each hour drawing them closer, telling them what life might be if they were together. And—she was married. Wife to

a careless, brainless soldier—who followed other women openly.

Brief spell of love when all save love was forgotten. A memory which neither could regret, for to them it was sinless. The stern reality—bitter past now—before the inevitable ending. Before the dream grew sordid. It was not in her to scheme and plot, to bribe maids, and learn to tell lies. It would spoil the perfection of their friendship, so they parted—one to go out to India and die there, the other to live single for her sake, with a pain which never died in his heart.

"Yes. It is admirable—delightful. But, I feel cold to-night." Mainwaring got up, looking pinched and tired now.

Bedroom candles were lighted—the big house sank to sleep. All save one.

Roland had taken the book from his pocket. Looked again at the picture of the heroine. Opened a page. The writer knew how to command attention. Roland read a little. What did this scene mean? set round with light gowns and flashing jewels, touched in with stencil of carmined lips and brushed across with powder—the atmosphere was on it. Of the underworld, he, Roland, knew nothing of. Who was she? this slim woman who was driven from a house. Who was the other? pale, sorrowful, the blight of unhappy love upon her.

He turned back to the beginning. He read on. They loved, and gained lightly in those pages. Solid virtue sat sulkily, one corner of his cloak just held across the censor's eyes, but there were two who loved in reality and were cleverly portrayed.

Roland's cheek grew flushed, his eyes bright. This, then, was loving. He read of hands which touched, of

lips that clung, of the perfume of light hair, of love which was truly of the senses but vividly described.

The chill of the dawning crept through the window as he finished. His candles had guttered down. He held the book in the chill wan light to finish it.

The book had brought a man's new heart to life. He crept back to his warm bed and lay feverish, far from sleep.

So this was love. The foolish, pet names in the book were on his lips. He could never feel like that for stolid Agatha. And so, since his life was his own, he would never marry her. He must know light and life, as he had read of it. The habit of obedience fell from him as a cloak. He would go as he had intended, but come back now when he chose.

"You are not looking well, Roland." Hume put away the cook's troubled and crestfallen idea of an omelette. "You look tired."

"I did not sleep, sir."

"No wonder," Hume said to himself, "with all this novelty upon you."

Agatha, stolid, pretty, came in. "Morning, Roland. Many happy returns," she said woodenly. She was creamily, softly young, with no fear of morning light. The leathery omelette presented no difficulty to her. She ate with the slowness of the healthily hungry. Going quietly to the side-table for more eggs and slices of ham. Coming back to hot biscuits and home-made jam, finishing with a heaped plate of forced strawberries.

Congratulations for Sir Roland. Of age and his own master. Presents on his plate. A silver cigarette-case from Lady Cosway; a pocket-book from Lord Hume; a signet-ring from his uncle. Boyhood had fallen away,

these were the emblems of man's estate. A beautifully bound book from Basling—Tennyson, a poet hitherto barred, but now permitted.

"What jolly things." Agatha picked up the case. She remembered with a sense of injury that Tony had given it to her mother last Christmas, the initial R. upon it. How mean to give away Tony's presents!

"You liked the book?" she whispered, looking admiringly at tall Roland.

He wished she would not giggle when she whispered.

"Yes, thank you," he answered, shyly. "It was very pretty."

"Then keep it from me. I've nothing for you. I thought it was splendid."

Agatha took another strawberry—a great fat one. There was no one to tell her that the blue bound book had cost her the various houses in the United Kingdom, and the person of Roland Mainwaring. She dipped the strawberry into some sugar and sucked her fingers frankly.

"Thank you," said Roland. "I loved it, Agatha."

There was so much to do,—lawyers to see—tenants reading long dull addresses—guests to eat a long, dull luncheon of cold meat—the toasting of Sir Roland—the speech to be given in response; the throwing open for the first time of the Court to its neighbours. There was to be a garden-party—the county had been bidden and accepted.

"Roland." Lord Hume came to the weary, flushed boy just as luncheon was over. "Do you still mean to go?"

"Yes. I shall tell my uncle to-night. I shall leave on Thursday."

So carefully shepherded, so madly brought up, and

now about to tear the web wrought in sixteen quiet years.

"I shall speak to Roland this evening." Clive Mainwaring stopped his friend. "It is better to let his wedding be settled."

"You think he will marry Agatha?" Hume said, almost sadly.

"Of course he will. You will see then, Hume, how much this boy owes to me—as he himself will see later. He is attracted; there will be no difficulty at all."

Sir Roland was wearier still before the party was over. Women—so many women now, but none who fluttered with gauzy veils and flashed light glances. Worthy wives, pretty daughters, all thirsting to see the Hermit, as they had dubbed the boy, and sniffed as they saw Lady Agatha.

He grew hot, awkward, under their frank curiosity. Soon Sir Roland was missing. Rowing Agatha upon the lake away from everyone. Coming back when the last carriage had raised its cloud of dust on the avenue. And he could not be scolded under the circumstances.

Dinner—more evilly rendered than the night before—since ambition having seized the poor cook, he tried a higher flight. Fish creams humped in stolid mounds; cutlets swam greasily; the savoury was a mere reek of vinegar and bite of pepper.

"I—am going to tell him now." Roland had drawn Hume aside, for his uncle had gone to his study.

Now, a half-crazed old man's schemes were to be plucked to pieces.

"Now," he said, "I shall leave this on Thursday."

"It is your own life, boy," said Hume, quietly. "So go. Tell him."

And then—a boy's cry echoing shrilly. "Basling—Lord Hume—Dawes—Quick! Quick!"

For with his face ashen, Clive Mainwaring was fainting.

"Amyll—to smell," he said piteously. "Lord, how this hurts. Hume, have you heard of this—of this. Roland is going away—alone. You can't mean it, Roland."

"Yes," said Roland, his jaw set. "I've always meant to do it, uncle."

Always meant to. As the years glided peacefully. When he had been so proud and so secure, the boy had always meant to trick him.

"To go—out into the world. Into the tracks of Belial—to see the sisters of the eventide. Dear Heaven!" cried Mainwaring.

"I shall see them, no doubt," said Roland, puzzled.

"And ill equipped to meet them." Lord Hume's voice rang sternly. "I tell you, Clive, Roland will be all right. He is coming to me—first, eh, Roland?"

"Yes. If you are there," said Roland.

Entreaty, threat, and fresh entreaty. The joys of blameless matrimony painted in rose and gold. No answer save that dogged setting of the jaw.

"I am a fool—a fool even before a girl. I will be a fool no longer. I always meant to go."

"You'll come to me then, Roland?" entreated Hume.

"Yes, sir, I will, as you want me."

But the going was not at once. Roland would not

leave the old man who gasped through the summer days fighting for life. He bade Lady Cosway, who was extremely angry with her host, a relieved good-bye. Come to see them? Yes, later on, when he had travelled.

"I must see the world," he said quietly, "in my own way. Then, if you ask me I will come gladly."

"Good-bye, Roland." Agatha squeezed his hand. After all he was very dull. Tony was so much better than a long yawn through life. But still, if mamma insisted. "I left the other book for you," she said.

"The boy will come through despite his training," said Lord Hume, as he went back to London. "But he'll suffer first," he said sadly.

CHAPTER III

JUNE and July paced through long cloudless days. The parched earth cracked, and flowers drooped and died in the ornamental beds. Now and again thunder came blackly to give relief, but the summer held gloriously. Farmers talked of short crops as they saved the fragrant hay. Men and horses died in big towns, stricken by the heat wave. England had forgotten her grey reign of tears, and showed what she could be.

Clive Mainwaring lay ill and peevish, holding to his room, since his illness kept Roland with him. And even now, when words, straight from man to man, would have melted the boy, there came only peevish lecture and sharp remonstrance.

Roland said nothing. The waiting days were evil ones for him, for, throwing dry knowledge on the dust-heap, he buried himself in the froth of romance.

Great books which he should have read—the master words of Dickens, of Thackeray, of Kipling, of Dumas and Shakespeare, were left alone. He skimmed the gay novels of the hour. Lost himself in word dreams of colour and romance. Once he took up his Tennyson, and felt his soul answer the gentle soul from which the poetry had flowed; yet put it aside wilfully, because it seemed part of his training, to read of a foolish tale of love.

Starved men eat strange food. The boy read until he looked at his world with warped views—even his love of sport dying in his impatience to be gone.

It was the end of August when he believed his uncle really better. He came into the sombre library to write some business letters, and ask Basling to write others.

"I am off to-morrow, Basling; I can leave now."

"Truly, Roland. And—quite alone?" The grey-faced man looked at him wistfully.

"As a man should go—without a nurse," laughed Roland.

"And I—go in a day or two," said the old tutor.

"You!" Roland looked up, startled.

"Yes, of course. I have only stayed on during these months at your request, Roland. Your uncle wants no company. He is, in fact, going to Nauheim for his health."

"You've got a place, Basling?" It was no longer boy speaking to tutor, but the moneyed man talking to the dependent.

Basling's thin face was very grey. "I have written to a great many people," he said drearily. "I am elderly, Roland, and a small salary is no use to me. But—I wish you were not going out alone, boy. And—remember—your upbringing was no fault of mine."

The desire for warning speech quivered on his lips. Yet an old crust of reserve is hard to break; the man was too shy to speak. Lord Hume would do it.

Roland closed one letter quickly. He was decisive even in the smallest things. He met the look in the tired, sunken eyes. Old Basling, chill automaton and mere machine of knowledge, grieved honestly for the parting.

"I've been with you so long, Roland," said the tutor, his voice faltering.

Roland took up a typewritten letter. "Do you particularly want to teach again?" he said thoughtfully.

"I have ploughed for a long time in dusty fields," said Basling, smiling faintly.

"Then, look here. My place in Worcestershire is let to Americans. The steward-agent there has died. I should think the work's easy; just seeing to things, and the old lawyer there will tell you what to do. Take it; the salary's low, but there's a house for your mother —land—a garden."

"Roland!" Are we ever too old to miss happiness. A house—land—a settled income. This to an old, grey fellow who had dreaded the toil in some small school; the noisy clamour of boys; the studying of fresh methods of teaching by one too old to study. Peace in the quiet country. Assured safety for the kind old woman who still called him "child."

"Roland, it is too much. God knows I'll work for you. It is too much."

Roland's gruff "That's all right" was typically English and boyish. Yet the first real joy of his inheritance came to him then.

Trifling items, such as furniture—two Jersey cows—and a garden full of flowers, were included in the orders sent to his lawyer.

"Later, perhaps, I'll be there myself," said Roland, smiling.

Dawn on his day of liberty came thunderously. Murk of strange shaped clouds across a sea of blue—the mutter and rumble of the storm, circling, yet never near; the heaviness of it in the still air.

"You have distressed me, Roland." Clive Mainwaring bade the boy cold adieux. "I would have sent you to travel as befits you."

"As befits a fool, sir," said Roland, coldly. "I am sorry to distress you, but the fault is not all mine. I have asked often enough for school, for college, for liberty, and you refused it."

"Knowing what these things mean—I did."

"Am I so weak that I must have done ill there," stormed Roland. "Are there no clean-minded men in England who have grown up in an ordinary way?"

"Many, I hope," said his uncle, flushing.

"Then I should have had the chance. Good-bye, uncle. Come, let us part friends."

A cold handshake was his answer. The scheme of a lifetime hurts as it crashes about the ears of our self-esteem.

The big horses took Roland to the station. Since his majority he had ridden out past the gates, but not often, for people stared at him.

The joy of youth and life was full on him as he stood waiting for the slow train which would take him to the junction. He was childishly interested in everything, and afraid to show his interest. A wire had been sent to Lord Hume, telling him of the start. All seasons were alike to Roland. He did not know that London in August was a mere desert.

The roaring bustle of the big station was new joy to him. Seeing other men give the porters money, he gave, too, half-crowns which brought the guards to the carriage door, obsequiously civil.

"A young dook, that there. Better see to 'im."

"Would his lordship like the door locked? Would he have a luncheon basket or lunch in the car?"

"Oh, is there lunch upon the train." Roland was deeply interested. "And I am not a lord. I am Sir

Roland Mainwaring." No, he would not be locked in. He was afraid to offer money to this well-dressed official who remarked firmly that he would return.

Roland liked company, liked watching. A young couple came scurrying along the platform—the girl in pale pink, with huge picture hat, the man carrying bundles of papers and boxes of sweets. They dropped confetti as they hurried, the girl at her ease, courting attention, the bridegroom shy.

"Lock you in, sir?" The guard fussed up to the bridegroom.

Roland saw the guard pocket a tip. He felt nothing less than gold from him would content this large official. It was given, and no avowed baronetcy could drown thanks to "your grace."

Two men lounged in with gun-cases, fishing-rods. Off to Scotland. Roland listened to them talking.

One was a light, bright-faced young fellow, the other dark and heavy.

"Yes. I hear milady was bitterly disappointed." The little man laughed. "Had to go home again—with no wedding settled, and the youngster made off to see life, as he was bound to do. Aggie tells me he's dull as ditchwater. Naturally, poor young goose!"

Aggie tells me. Roland reddened. Could they be talking of him?

One nudged the other. They spoke more quietly for a time.

"Going up there now." The small man's voice would raise itself. "To stay with Cissie Eden. Yes. Aggie's there. But I've no chance on my princely pay of the line."

Soldiers, then. Roland noted their bronzed faces

Fate had flung him straight against Captain Tony Lessingham, Agatha's ideal.

He had forgotten matches for his cigarettes. Tony offered him some, talking to him for a few minutes. Roland was shy, afraid he might betray himself.

"You're going shooting," he said, looking at the cases.

"Yes. And for a slash at white trout. Great fun, that. Are you for it?"

"I am going to London."

"Lord! I don't envy you. You'll broil there, and it's a desert now."

Roland dropped back to his papers, puzzled. London with its golden joys and wonders—a desert. He had dreamt of it; used it as a byword to certain perfection, and been pitied.

They tore through blue-grey haze of heat up the red hot line into dark, humming stations, where Roland hung out and watched; passed others with a mere roar to mark the passage; Roland wondering childishly, at first, if the train had forgotten to stop to pick up the people who waited there.

Nearer and nearer to the great Mother of Cities. Sordid rows of houses; hideous shelters for men and women who called them home. Dreadful visions of backyards. Then roofs—a sea of slate, sloping, humping, swimming to vacancy under the pall of smoke. Almost appalling, these endless dwelling-places. A taste of soot, heavy and hot, upon the lips; the curious negative freshness of the smoky and healthy town.

Drab streets, crossed slowly. Was this London? These lengths of ugliness; trams and buses crawling in the glare? Dive into dark tunnels. Out to more houses. More seas of roofs, higher now, vaster, more

imposing. The city of mean streets was merging to the greater one about her heart.

"All tickets ready, please!" The guard paid farewell homage to his grace. Himself found a porter. The good god of railway servants might send this fledgeling on his train again.

"Who was he, I wonder?" Tony Lessingham gathered his things. "The man called him your grace."

"His initials were R. M.," said his companion, carelessly. "A handsome boy. Got in at Almworth. Say, I believe he was Agatha's future."

"Rot," said Tony, uncertainly.

Roland got into a taxi; gave Lord Hume's address. To him home was home—a place for a man to stay in. He was placidly certain of finding Hume in his rooms, or at the worst away for a few hours.

Out of the streets by Paddington, wide, with fine houses about them, past Lancaster Gate, where the tube station was pouring out a crowd. The great length of the road stretching widely splendid, Kensington Gardens at one side. This was London, as they dived and swooped through the roar and heat and smell of the city which Society called a desert.

Taxis seemed as though they were coming straight at them, then a glide, and they were past. Oxford Street ahead; huge shops; the hurrying tense-faced crowd on the hot pavement. Then they swooped to the right. Down Bond Street to the quiet of the Albany.

The porter answered the flushed, eager boy. "His lordship? Oh, he was out of town. Shooting in Scotland. He went every year. Any letters or wires were forwarded."

Hume was away. Roland's heart see-sawed be-

tween relief and dismay. He had kept his part of the compact.

"Thank you," he said blankly. "Then—could you advise an hotel?"

The porter could, speedily. The Ritz or Claridge's. He had the air of the man who knows no other.

Roland chose the Ritz; was decanted there; condescendingly given a room when half were empty. The Ritz's visitors were not there to fill it in August. Roland took his pass, was ushered to a room which stifled his country lungs; and would have another. Two, opening out of each other—he must breathe.

Tea then in the hall. His eyes wide for each visitor about him. A few Americans, prettily dressed, sat in the hotel, iced water in glasses on their trays, their high voices ringing nasally and yet prettily. They were tourists, neat, graceful, slim, but not beautiful. Extremes of fashion oppressed them to a lack of skirt width which made their walking a mere totter, outlined their limbs as they sat down.

Liberty sat sourly on Roland's tongue. It was lonely. But he loved the colour and flash of it—the bustle of the ever-changing groups, the padding swiftness of the waiters—the little cries of the messenger boys, as they came with telegrams. The roar from Piccadilly. One was a number here—no longer an individual, but a mere number. Roland laughed. He swung out into the seething street. What would he do? Go to a theatre, he supposed—but alone—and loneliness was not pleasant to him. Even Basling's grey face would have been welcomed. Fate was fighting hard to thrust him down.

The painted tide was flowing slowly, for it was early yet, into its great channel. Roland stopped to look

eagerly at a mere child in black, her slim arms in long black gloves, her face a mask of face cream, her lips scarlet, a reek of musk drifting from her.

But there was no flutter of veils, no bright girlish laugh. This colouring was crude, overdone. The girl raised heavy eyes, daubed round with kohl, weary eyes which had lost their right of youth, burnt out with hot rooms and late sleepless hours. She came closer to Roland, speaking to him.

"Fine night," she said, her thin, Cockney voice ringing clearly, her teeth baring in a mirthless stereotyped grin.

"Oh, very." So in this strange London these girls who were something like Trixie spoke to strangers.

Two others passed. "You will meet the sisters of the underworld." Roland remembered, and blushed awkwardly.

"A little cool drink would be nice," the girl said plaintively, standing looking at him. "An iced cocktail now."

"I am staying at the Ritz," he said, open-eyed. "Shall I get you one there?"

"Lord love a duck! The likes of me in the Ritz!" she laughed shrilly. "If you'll stand me one, I know a place. We might drive to it."

Roland hailed a taxi, and got in gravely. At least he had a companion. The place was the Tivoli Bar, smoke-tainted, full of lounging youths and women.

The girl drank thirstily, ate a sandwich. "Don't know when I'll see dinner," she said plaintively. "Hard times often, my dear, now—to us who must stay up in London."

She was cheaply, blatantly common. A good-natured, kindly little soul in her mindless way. She

had tried to work once; to slave in a low-class drapery house, and stand all day on weary, hurting feet, and smile and say "Modom" graciously. Then to dive into a noisome gas-lit vault and look wearily at weak tea, stale bread and doubtful butter. Cheap good looks showed her another way; she took it, with no thought of the future; content to live while she could.

"I live in Marylebone," she told him. "Oh—a neat little place, my dear. I'll give you a bit of supper there later. We'll take something home."

Roland, taking out his money to pay, felt his fingers touch a piece of cardboard. He pulled it out. It was the Darcy Brownes' address in Cheyne Gardens. Rosie Montmorencie's — late Harris's — accent, her over-painted cheeks, offended him. He would drive to the Gardens and find Darcy Browne.

"I—I have an appointment," said Roland, stammering. "I must go—but I'll bring back a friend and meet you."

"Oh, dear," said Rosie, dolefully. "Will y'meet me then, m'dear, at the Osford—or here. I'll wait for you."

Roland would. He wrote down the name. A friendly London, this, in its welcome to strangers. "And—your dinner," he said shyly.

"Do without that, dearie," she said languidly.

Roland, distressed, beckoned a fatherly waiter; bade him see the young lady was fed and looked after, pressed ample payment for three dinners into the fat hand, and hurried away.

"Shucks alive! Vot is he?" gasped the German, as his fat body shook with laughter, and he looked at Rosie.

"I think he's the Angel Gabriel walkin' Lunnon in serge clothes," said Rosie, dolefully. "Here you—Franz—halves there. What'd 'e give yer? Strite—it's for *my* dinner."

Franz was not obdurate. Rosie brought him many tips.

Roland flew through the press of traffic, far less now than in June, but thicker as it grew late. The loungers at the bar, the friendly girl with the strange accent were not part of his colour dream.

The house in Cheyne Gardens was not shut up as most of its companions. Roland's ring and inquiry brought Lancelot Darcy Browne in *negligé* of flannels to the door, full of apologies at being found.

"Sir Roland Mainwaring. Well, I never did! The strangest thing my being here. Sis married—Trix, y'know; and asked me to come up and send some kit to her. Everyone's out of town, of course, but I ran up to get Trixie's things. Well, I never did. It's luck—sheer, downright luck—so it is!"

Lancelot Darcy Browne was as common in his way as Rosie Montmorencie in hers, but it was a cleverer and more impressive way, and that, above all, of a man of the world. He was careful of that. Darcy Browne was neither vicious nor virtuous. He liked what he termed "a spree, my boy," more for the enjoyment he felt he ought to get out of it, than for any enjoyment he really felt. Full of small economies, he was always ready to be paid for, and then to appear reckless as a dozen Don Juans, or at least to talk as recklessly.

"I'm quite free. It's just pure luck. You've come up alone. Now, give me ten minutes to get in togs. Will you go back and dress—or not? You'd rather. Right oh! Mother Fortune send my black

and whites—are in my bag. And then—we'll do a night out."

"Shall we dine at my hotel?" asked Roland, shyly. "Is it a good plan?"

"Where—the Grand, did you say? The Ritz! Oh, rather, old chap! Dine there, and of course, there's nothing on, but the woman at the Palace dances well—and we could have supper somewhere. I know a couple of smart little dears—at the Frivolity. They'll come out and enjoy it."

This was Life! Roland felt his blood tingle to it. He was met on equality by this man of the world. They would dine—sup with actresses.

"Left the taxi waiting?" said Browne. "My—you'll have to pay up. The Ritz!" he said magnificently, seeing two neighbouring housemaids on the pavement.

"Lor'! he's goin' a dash, 'e is," said Gladys to Violet.

Dark hints, shrewd advice, thrown out delicately by Mr Darcy Browne as they drove up again. "Luck—sheer luck—that Roland should have found him. But London was a desert and so hot! S'pose they went off to-morrow — to Trewville — it was thus Darcy Browne pronounced it—to some French seaside place. Casinos there, old boy, and pretty girls from Paris; or I'm sure Vi and Loo might get off to cheer us up."

Dinner made Lancelot Darcy Browne still sure of luck. He chose the champagne carefully, criticized its temperature. He snubbed the head waiter, and told him the last "moose of jambong" he had had there had been much better. He ordered Turkish coffee and green Chartreuse.

"Too hot for port," he said. "Like that champagne, eh?"

The sparkling wine had flushed Roland's cheeks. He trod on air. He was a god—about to see his kingdom life. The colour, the little tables, the sweet flowers, the hum and throb of this business of dining, was all wine to his mind.

Half-shyly he told of Rosie and his appointment.

"Impudent something," said Darcy Browne. "My dear boy, one doesn't do that sort of thing. Not us, you know. She will be waiting. Let her wait."

He whispered confidences, but half understood, to Roland, as he sipped his café noir, and glasses of green Chartreuse.

"Of course you understand," Roland fidgeted boyishly. "If you show me round—it's all my—show."

"My dear old boy," said Lancelot Darcy Browne, airily, "I oughtn't to, but if you really want to."

Roland went to the office, changed some crisp notes. One, after some diffident inquiry, was despatched to the Osford, where it gladdened the heart of Miss Rosie Montmorencie.

"He's a gentleman," she said, her big eyes darkening. "Sakes alive! I can go home and rest now; in a taxi too."

For lightly come, lightly go with the Rosie Montmorencies of life. Money is to spend and not to keep.

"By Jove! it's luck," Lancelot reiterated it as they drove to the Palace. "Felt drawn to you, dear old chap, when we fell on you that day in Devon." Lancelot's heart was mellowed by champagne. It was delightful, this, as from man to man. Lancelot Browne had no idea of Roland's upbringing. Roland told him shyly that he had never seen anything, never been

anywhere; but the real depth of the boy's ignorance was beyond Darcy Browne to plumb.

"By Jove! Fancy you never having been up to Town. Never having been inside a theatre. A moment, old boy, while I 'phone to the Friv."

Very important, as the man about town, on terms of intimacy with actresses.

"Right ho!" He came beaming from the bureau. "They'll come to the Savoy or Carlton. They didn't like my idea of doing it easily. Oh, rum birds, these girls, I tell you. Now, isn't this A1. Eh? Pity London's dead empty, isn't it? But later on."

The splendid handsome theatre fascinated Roland. The rich colouring, the big stage, set for some acrobats' turn—the rows of men smoking and chatting, the women, principally country cousins and foreigners, in the stalls.

He was enthralled. Boyishly delighted at each turn. Even in the desert season of the dog days the Palace puts on something good.

A man in stereotyped baggy clothes, with nose reddened to ruby, sang some catchy songs.

Of course Lancelot knew them all. Roland did not care for them.

"They are not funny," he said, frowning. Hearing how "Jane's father kicked Jane's lover—from be'ind—from be'ind. Poor fellow, never lookin', got a shookin'," etc.

The heavy curtains fell; the big men changed the numbers. It was all light and colour and splendour to Roland. And then—up again. A setting of purple mountain and sunset sky. A woman bounding on. No great dancer, but with the grace of her Spanish race, her fine figure bending, passionate, inviting, her gorgeous skirts seething as her well-shaped feet flashed

out. A colour scheme of orange and scarlet, of silver and deep blue; the woman's body rising as a calyx from the flaunting foliage. Her round arms laden with gems. Her handsome, wicked face wreathed in smiles.

La, la, la!—she gave a tambourine song, gliding, swinging, showing each modelled limb as she bent and flung. It was a dance no Englishwoman could have done—passion in every movement.

Roland's young blood took fire. It moved him sensuously, exquisitely. He wanted Lancelot Browne to keep quiet, to cease chatting of limbs and bust, to let him look and dream. Life and colour and joy; he gulped at them; with a true artist's desire to have someone with him who would love them as he did for the beauty of them.

"Bit of orl right, ain't she?" said Lancelot, gaily. "Look well as a living picture, wouldn't she? Circe or Aphrodite, or one of those airified girls in the classical dictionary."

"Would she?" said Roland, softly.

"Look well in the altogether— Hey, old boy, here are the Red Girls. Good high kickers—imitation of the Russian dancers."

Black limbs below scarlet skirts. Flashing, kicking, meeting toe to toe, high above the dancers' heads. Clever, but palpably studied and taught. A mere show of how far supple limbs can stretch. It was good, but it struck no note to Roland.

He grew tired of the heat. Was glad when the pictures began and Lancelot took him out. The cool rest of the Savoy was delightful. Pretty women strolled by. The nostrils which had only smelt flowers, sniffed at Tréfle and Violette de Parme, and heavier

Opoponax. Here, as at the Ritz, it was not the hour of the Savoy's more regular visitors.

"They're late, of course. Have to change. Ah, here you are at last, you two!"

Two pretty girls came from the cloak-room, their gowns a little low, a little tight. The powder on their faces a little thick. One was tall, auburn-haired, blue-eyed, heavy-faced and dollishly pretty. The other slim and small, rather demure, with ash-gold hair simply done, and devoid of rouge or carmine. Her eyes were cleverer; she wore only pearls, while the taller girl was loaded with mock diamonds.

"Sir Roland Mainwaring — Miss Hildebrand, Miss Deering. Good girls to come," said Lancelot, graciously

Loo Hildebrand—front row, right hand—flung a sharp look at Roland. A mere boy—a toff. This little Browne man who treated her to cheap suppers at the Florence had been right. Violet Deering—front, left—gave him a shrewd look.

Roland was somewhat strikingly handsome in his evening-dress. Clean-limbed, well-built, active and strong. Already he was finding himself. He thanked them shyly for coming; he ordered supper himself.

"Is there anything special—you would fancy?" he pushed the menu towards Loo. To him they were his friends—therefore ladies.

"Peaches," said Loo. "Lobsters, and some good sweets. Got any, Johnnie, hey?"

The head waiter bowed gravely, with a courteous air of delivering a snub. They were not at Romano's or the Continental.

"Fizz, that's good,"—the good supper of the Savoy was spread before them. The girls eating and drinking

hungrily, beaming happily. This was all right—a pigeon to be plucked delicately—without undue haste.

But Roland's evening was nearly over. Champagne again made his head swim; the lights danced and he felt sick and giddy. He put it away, drinking iced water until the giddiness passed. Then he got up.

He was sorry. He was not well. "To be frank, I've only once taken champagne—and it's disagreed with me." Better he should go home now.

Boyish generosity before he went. A huge basket of peaches for the two guests. A box of cigarettes for each. A second basket of monstrous grapes. A bill paid without care or thought.

Violet Deering, *née* Violet Jones, was all sweet sympathy, hiding a solid disappointment. Grilled bones had been ordered at a tiny flat, which the two shared.

"You'll ask us out again?" she whispered, softly. "Here's my address. And so—good-night, Sir Roland."

And so good-night. London winked out through the still night, dark now with clouds.

Pears' Soap. Reckitt's Blue. How they clicked across the dimness, offensively prosaic.

Sick, giddy, Roland lay back, his head aching sorely.

"I say, Darcy Browne, why not stay here with me. They can give you a room. Stay at the hotel."

Lancelot was nothing loath, but Roland had dropped into heavy sleep before he came back with his things. Heavy yet feverish. Dreams maddening him on his first night of liberty.

Waking feverishly to hear in fancy the thrumming music of the orchestra, see the colour of the theatres; the Spanish dancer as she flung herself passionately from posture to posture.

Liberty was good. He meant to drink it to the dregs.

CHAPTER IV

ROLAND flung his headache from him in an ice-cold bath.

Lancelot Darcy Browne woke as a king in one of the luxurious bedrooms of the Ritz. Fortune had descended on him in a golden shower. There were many schemes in Lancelot's head, and all of them revolved about the question of his own advancement. If Roland had not puzzled him he would have felt easier, and there was something about the boy which he was a little afraid of.

"Little bit of a prude, I'd fancy," soliloquized Lancelot, as he flung pungent crystals into a hot bath. The bill was Roland's affair. Later he came, spuriously smart, in correct out-of-season blue flannels, to breakfast.

They would leave for France that evening. "Sassy little pair, those two, weren't they?" Lancelot Browne ate languidly. It was very hot.

"They seemed very nice," said Roland, half shyly.

Lancelot looked at him sharply. He was never sure whether Roland was not laughing a little in his sleeve—whether he was quite as foolish as he ought to have been.

"Say, old boy, you'll want a rig-out, won't you?" Sampson & Edwards would measure and send on. My tailors? Oh, no, quite beyond me—but your sort of people."

So was it not natural when the great men's august representatives took Sir Roland's order with respect

that Lancelot should be begged to order also. "A few suits," said Roland, vaguely; "include them, please."

A lordly prince this, writing his cheque in advance, without thought of the value of money.

Bond Street's narrow dignity stretched right and left from the quiet street they were in. Roland would have liked to be alone now to look at the beauty of the Venetian glass, gold and ruby and amber and blue and green, translucent, exquisite. To peep at the array of jewels, flashing in their velvet beds. Opals, full of strange fire; cold, winking diamonds; blue turquoise; rubies; deep, restful sapphires.

But Lancelot Browne drove him on. He called the glass gaudy humbug; the jewels bits of "orl right." His fancy led him to shops where cigarette-cases shone, with delicate enamel enriching them, and made Roland buy, it being again natural that he should share; to tobacco shops, and later where expensive ties bloomed chastely dull and soft. Lancelot made good use of his morning.

"Your sister married lately?" Roland thought how nice it would have been to have walked in this new shop-land with those merry blue eyes flashing up at him.

"Yes—a jolly good sort too; a tea-planter in Ceylon. Not too well off."

"One gives wedding presents, does one not?" The books had taught Roland this. "I'd like to send her one."

"My dear old boy, too kind." Roland turned back towards those wrought-beaded glasses of amber and green and ruby, but Lancelot checked him.

"So hard to carry," he said, "to pack, y'know. Something silver now, useful—or a little brooch or bangle. If you *will* send."

The cool of a great jeweller's shop received them. Asparagus dishes, rose-bowls, were not to Roland's mind. Something brilliant, frothy, to tune with his memory of Trixie.

No. He would see some jewels. A pendant caught his eye, a lace-work of tiny stones, red and blue and white. That would do—and "that" was seventy pounds.

Lancelot gasped. The boy must be crazy. He hoped the cheque would be cashed.

"Send it to the hotel—to me—to Sir Roland Mainwaring, to the Ritz."

Luncheon then, and Lancelot Browne drank his champagne alone. Roland took hock-and-soda. There was no real joy of ostentation in him. He did not care for the head waiter's bows, and the wine waiter's solicitous finger on the list.

It was all nectar, sweeter than the champagne to Darcy Browne.

The sparkling wine loosed the elder man's tongue, melted the veneer upon him, left him more frankly vulgar, slyly vicious.

"Oh, what a time they'd have over there. France was the place when one could pay. How would it be?" the flushed face of Mr Browne grew ugly as it reddened, "to take a suite for a fortnight, have a regular little establishment for a bit. Fun, eh? May easily pick up a couple of actresses over there."

Roland flushed, knowing enough to flush, and not enough to see what it meant.

"Must actresses come into the scheme of seeing the world? They might not care for it," he said doubtfully.

"They'd pretend to—anyhow," smiled Lancelot.

"Besides—why not? We'd do them top-hole. All they want, and—" The conscious smile of the great god Man trickled meaningly across Lancelot Browne's coarse little face. "They'd care for it all right," he said. "Don't be modest, old chap. But we'll think about it. I've wired for rooms for the present. Hope we'll get them."

"You have enough money? You must not spend anything." Roland had given Lancelot some notes for small expenses.

"Lord, yes, old chap. Now come along."

Lord Hume's day in Scotland had been spoilt by Roland's wire, sent on to him. "The boy in London—alone!" He wired back at once.

"Where was Sir Roland? Had he left an address?"

The hall-porter replied curtly—"No address had been left."

Late that evening his wits flashed to brilliancy. He wrote a wire of his own.

"Sir Roland had asked for the name of an hotel. He had advised the Ritz. Should he inquire there?"

At nine that evening the answer—"Inquire at once. If there, tell him to start for Scotland, to come here to my sister's. Now, at once. To start in the morning."

The hall-porter left his office in charge of his subordinate, and drove to the Ritz, open wire in hand.

"Yes, Sir Roland Mainwaring had been there. He had just left. He and his friends had driven to Charing Cross. No address was registered for letters. Sir Roland as he paid the bill had mentioned France.

"So, if the boy is to be saved he must do it himself,"

said Hume, crumpling up the telegram. "Yes, I am put out, Grace." This to a slender woman who stood by the billiard-table. They had just come from dinner. "So would you be if you saw a good boy's nature juggled about by a fool."

He told Lady Grace the story.

"Madness indeed," she said quietly; "there will be no folly now too deep for that boy to fly down to."

"I am not so much afraid of passing folly." Hume chalked a cue. "It's of clever harpies who will find it too easy to fool him into marrying them. There is something too clean and strong about him for the cult of ordinary boys' madness. I shall set a man to-morrow to follow and find him. His father was my dearest friend—long ago."

"Children are a responsibility." Grace Knox took a cue up. Their after-dinner game was an established thing at Glendourie. "Thank Heaven for my Margaret. And as I say it—here she is."

A tall girl, slender, a little grave and pale, with deep, steadfast eyes, moving gracefully, slowly, her white dress clinging to her as she walked. Men were a little afraid of Margaret Knox. Women bit off scandals, and put them away but half enjoyed when she came into a room. She was a little too quiet for her years, almost as one who played a part in life.

"My Margaret." Lady Grace smiled at the girl, who strolled on to the conservatory. "But she had that dreadful trouble, Hume—poor Rupert's death. Went away—even from me—and been a kind of saint ever since. Come, I shall beat you to-night."

. . . . . .

A restless fit fell upon Roland. He did not care for

Trouville with its golden plage, its green-shuttered houses, its Casino, its endless noise and gaiety. Deep in his heart he knew that he wearied of Darcy Browne; the man's vulgarity annoyed him, his love of display, and of spending money. The Frenchwomen fascinated him. Their graceful figures, soft skins, light gestures. But the fascination was that of an onlooker. He wanted to sit and watch. The constant, half-understood stream of vicious conversation offended him, even when he was afraid to seem a fool if he stopped it. Were women only mere puppets, one with an arm, one with a mouth adorable, one with a figure, and so forth.

"You are hard to be pleased, my boy, hey?" Lancelot picked up with two little actresses, exquisitely dressed, pallid little creatures, their lips carmine, their big tired eyes heavily painted round. Mr Darcy Browne was disappointed in what he termed the little kippers. Your Frenchwoman keeps her mask on in public. There was a natural refinement about these two which did not appeal to the ugliest tastes. They called Roland an "*enfant*" in loud asides, were pleasantly kind to him, and openly bored. Louise and Lolo had not scraped their money together to be bored. They passed out of Roland's life. High living, too much money, had reft Lancelot Browne's good sense from him. He found a big handsome girl, half Spaniard, half English. A coarse-tongued creature, sprung from the gutter. He brought her to dinner, plied her with champagne. Half drunk all too soon, her tongue left little sacred. Coarse jokes, loud laughs, until people turned to look.

"A person who ought not to be here." Jeanne Cartier, one of the best known women in Paris, whose friendship was only for millionaires, looked scornfully

at the woman at Roland's table. The boy heard the words, flushed hotly.

Dolores heard also; her next speech rang louder; she took old brandy with her coffee; lighted a Spanish cigarette. Lancelot Browne, more than half drunk also, chuckled loudly.

"Now, Roland, old boy, don't be a prude. Jolly girls, y'know. Only be young once, hey? Come, she'll take us to supper after the Casino, or now—if we like. Great girl, Dolores."

"I should not care to go, thank you." Roland looked round unhappily.

Dolores rapped out in coarse anger—"She wasn't good enough, wasn't she, for his saintship. She'd let him see."

Lancelot hurried the creature away, getting nervous now.

Mademoiselle Cartier came out on to the balcony. An exquisitely graceful creature, with the slim perfection which France knows how to attain. Her high lace gown floating in cloud-like perfection. Grande dame in her own way.

"Madame"—a stammering voice startled her—"I am sorry. I—did not know that—er—person would talk in that way close to you. My friend brought her in here."

Jeanne Cartier took in the tall, cleanly-built figure, the nameless stamp of English breeding.

"I understand, monsieur, and I thank you. She was not a fit person to dine here, or—pardon me—for you to know."

There are as many distinctive classes in the underworld as in our own. The aristocrat looked down with horror on this creature of the gutter.

"For me surely it does not matter," he said, "I am a man."

"You are very young, monsieur." This woman, who had ruined half a dozen men, was kindly in her way. "English, of course?"

"Sir Roland Mainwaring," he answered.

"Ah, then, Sir Roland, get back to England. Tell your friend that it is not permissible to bring such persons here to a decent hotel. Should you care for a little life, monsieur, I could myself introduce you to some friends in Paris later on."

"I am leaving here, madame," he said. "I am tired of it."

The Baron de Chateauriches, coming out on to the terrace, was warned by a gesture to stand back.

"In a moment, Gaston—I am busy now."

Monsieur le Baron raged with jealousy and was afraid to disobey.

"Yes, I am going on to Paris. I do not care for this sea. I want to live in cities for a time. I am such a fool, madame."

Deftly, with her Baron fuming a few yards away, Jeanne Cartier drew the boy's story from him.

"Never been away, brought up there without ever seeing a woman," she gasped. "Oh, monsieur, it was courting the vengeance of the gods of Sex. It was unnatural—immodest." She bent nearer Roland, looking at his strong, dark face. "Marry, monsieur," she said dramatically. "Find someone clever, bright, and marry. Do not be led into a slough by this low friend of yours. Good-night, monsieur."

"Who! What! Here!" exploded Monsieur le Baron, rightfully indignant.

"Tiens! Tiens! Tiens! À compte de fée. A folly," said Mademoiselle Jeanne. "Listen, then, Gaston, and go, heave that vulgar-faced Englishman, friend to this boy, into the sea, that he may drown and die clean."

"Qu'est-ce-que tu as?" gasped Gaston. "Is it the sun, Jeanne?" And then he listened, amazed.

When Lancelot Browne was taxed by Roland next day, his explosion of virtuous wrath was a study. "The cheek, the co-los-sal cheek of Jeanne Cartier who was down here with the Baron de Chateauriches. Of Jeanne, who was just the same as the other."

"Oh, surely, surely not," from Roland.

"But exactly, old boy, exactly. Not a pin's point of difference. Two of a trade never agree, that's all. She was jealous."

"The similarity was that of a duchess to a kitchen-maid, since both are women."

"It was jealousy," said Lancelot Browne, airily, twirling his moustache. "The woman wanted me—us, for herself. Had a try for you, I see, my boy."

"She was very nice to me. I am tired of this place. We will go to Paris. It's September now. The man here tells me it is filling. Anyhow, I shall go."

The bear leader ceased to be aggressive. What if bear should escape—this bear all stuffed with gold.

They rushed through the fair flat land, until the Seine shone silver through her osiers, and the spires of Paris rose against a cloudless sky. Montmartre high on its hill; the tall spire of Notre Dame above the sea of roofs. Paris in her light airiness; her splendid lines and spaces.

London, grim, full of care, keeps ward on her ports, crouches, befogged, plunged in smoke, oppressed by her

solid importance. Married woman and gay light of the eyes. London must keep her hands on the ships which come and go out to her many colonies. Great in her solid, ugly worth; proud of her prudish coating of morality, turning her face aside so that she may not see the tide of vice beneath the skim. A city of heavy banquets, walking with roar and rattle of traffic, and endless smoke of trains; but who loves her as one loves merry Paris, with her reckless waste of space, her graceful statues and splendid Bois, her light heart and careless, clever brain. "The land for the people," says London sonorously. "Railways for capitalists, I stand aside—I, the mother."

"My income for France," says gay Paris, laughing. "My government first, then let my sons make money, since if I am prosperous so are they." Oh, mighty London, so purse-proud and dogmatic. Yet Paris, which you despise, has no streets where poverty is so stamped and branded; her sons and daughters do not hurry, hurry, in the mad struggle for the right to live. There are not the wolfish faces, grey with hunger; the battered hopeless women who starve through so many winters—so little suffices in the land of sunshine. The underworld of vice is black and stormy as it is in London, but the underworld of mean grey terrible streets is not with merry Paris.

Bats and birds of ill-omen fly in her nights as in ours; but not heavy, crawling things, asking for bread—for bread for themselves and helpless, half-naked children.

The gaiety of it, the beauty, the noiselessness of the wide thoroughfares was joy to young Roland. Taxis might flash and run one down; but the endless procession of monsters, the huge motor buses were blissfully

absent. France went to his head as wine does. He bathed his senses in her sparkling waters, forgot to be angry with Lancelot, and plunged into the merry, painted world which strangers troop to see. The deepest depths he knew of, the wildest " sprees " were Lancelot's idea. They went to the stereotyped places—the Folie Bergère, the Moulin Rouge, the Bal Tabouret, strolled up towards Montmartre when the evening fell. Roland was no longer prude. He ate the apple of knowledge to its bitter core. Reckless with his money, flinging it here and there, on worthless presents for worthless people. Then, suddenly growing tired, coming with a gasp to the surface, and floating there, seeing how muddy the sea was.

His cleanly-minded, strong nature swung with a sense of sickness, with a deeper sense of injury. This had been driven upon him, this mad burst of folly. He knew that, given an ordinary boy's chance, he would have let it be.

One day he began to think. He walked alone in the Tuileries gardens, looking at the dying flowers, and the desire for quiet and the country beat down his dogged determination to see life.

" It was their fault. My uncle's fault. I could not live a fool. I am sick of it, sick of myself." Slowly across the gardens, out by the Place du Rivoli, down the long street, turning aside then into the old Palais Royale where kings had suffered, and courtiers fought and loved. But it carried no memories to Roland. French history had been one of the closed books. English in its driest form. Not French, since it was needless and romantic.

Back again then, down narrow streets, past the stuffy little theatre where he had listened to farce which

trusted to the tritest of old and mud-stained jokes and situations. But Lancelot had taken him there. Up past the Opera, turning again until he reached the Ritz. There was a note for him.

"I am dining Julie at the Americain. Meet me at Maximes for supper later. I can't get away. Meet at eleven. I'll see to your fun."

"To his fun!" Roland flung the note away. He dined for the first time in the pretty dining-room. It was cool there, with perfectly cooked food, perfectly served. It was a rest — peace. No noisy, foolish joking, no painted, pretty face opposite, smiling at him alluringly. The boy was worn, tired, sickened by late hours and bad wine.

He drank some light white wine, then strolled into the hall.

"Tell me something to go to see—something good," he said.

The man at the bureau looked at his list. "Something light—funny—sir?"

"No, good acting," said Roland, almost impatiently.

"Ah, it's not the season, sir. But you are lucky, as it happens. Mademoiselle Simone is on the Français for one night, with Guitry. And two people have just given me their stalls."

Roland went to see a great play, great actors and actresses. To hear the music of pure French. No vulgar, reeking jokes, but comedy, fresh and gay, and tragedy treading on its heels. He rose higher on the surface of his sea—caught at the rocks on the shore.

The theatre over, there was still an hour. He strolled to Maximes to tell Lancelot he would not sup with him. The café in the Rue Royale was filling at this hour, after the theatres.

Two nights before as they came out of the Americain, rain was falling heavily, and a stoutish woman near him had slipped, and almost fallen against a passing taxi. With a quick spring Roland had pulled her back, taken the splash of mud, and a jar from the wheel, himself.

The woman had poured out effusive thanks, but how Lancelot had laughed.

"The idea, Roly, of bothering for one of that crew. A fat old thing, too."

"She was a woman; her dress would have been ruined, and she might have been hurt."

"Pooh! And if she was!" Their companions, too, had laughed shrilly.

Now, as he sat down to one of the tables with its inevitable bottles of champagne—one must take it—he saw the same woman come in.

Light *frou-frou* of silks and laces about him; a medley of perfumes; the ordering, all around, of an unneeded meal. Here a millionaire merchant had sent for a great basket of fruits, hot-house grapes, and late peaches, to please a blue-eyed Austrian who supped with him. A gilded box of sweets was on the table; cigarettes of different brands. The girl nibbling at a dragée, sucking a grape, then half yawning, as she used all these as sauces to the fat, red-faced goose which must be her *pièce de résistance*.

The *garçons* measured their attention by the costliness of their orders. It was a tawdry place, more beloved by the English than the Parisian.

Lancelot would probably be late. Roland sat down and ordered languidly; he had no desire for food.

"Oh, anything," he said. "Œufs-gelée, fruits."

The man put down the little dishes of salads, anchovies, herrings, beetroot; the curious messes man delights in spoiling his appetite with.

Roland looked at them. Would he have strength to play the prude when Lancelot came? Would shame of ridicule keep him with the people he was learning to detest?

"Monsieur—you are alone. I may then thank you again." The fattish woman he had pulled from the splash of the taxi was standing at his table. She was bright-eyed, pleasant, her face frankly painted, and she was elderly beneath the paint.

"Pooh! It was my best gown too," she said; "this one." She revolved with a laugh to show a bright yellow silk, cleverly loose so as to hide her girth. "Ah, it is close to-night—summer again."

Roland's champagne bottle was full. "I really did nothing," he said shyly. "If—you would take a glass, madame."

"But it is good of you. Yet not that—a hock—an orangeade. I do not drink much champagne. It fattens," she said gaily. "Poof! this autumn is mad to-night in its airlessness. And grapes. I adore all fruit—"

She was as frankly pleased as a child, biting at great blooming grapes. Age was close to her, but she was handsome still.

"Marie Retz does not forget a kindness," she said. "And you look very tired, monsieur. Do you wait for your friend?"

"Yes," he said astonished. "Do you know him? I am waiting. I want to get back early."

"I know everything—everyone," she laughed. "Not born yesterday—boys to snuff—so—as you say in Engleesh. And you are afraid that they will not let you go back. Tiens! Marie knows." She leant forward, her white, well-shaped arms on the table. Her bright eyes shining kindly. "Do not wait—go home—right home. Get back to England and the cows and the wet grass. You are not for our life here, certainly not for the creatures you are with now."

"How did you know that I came from England," he said, smiling. "I might be Scotch, German."

"Poof! It is stamped on you. You are so cleanly bred, as they breed racers—and racers should keep to the grass. Go home, my dear," she said, more kindly still, "before you are ashamed to go. I—I've met boys like you before, and sent one or two home," she added, nodding. "Poof! I have seen you here—and—seen who you were with. Go, before they show you what they can be, those two. You have skimmed on the surface, my dear, so far—I know. I've seen you several times. Don't get down below the crust of it."

"Below the crust. What could be lower?" he thought.

"My dear, you do not know. I—Grosse Marie—I do, and we are not all harpies, you know. You were kind to me here. You get away to full moons and fogs—oh, I've seen your England—and cold and mud—and leave that little friend of yours behind. Poof! he drinks too much," she said, laughing. "He is not of your world."

"He has taken a lot of trouble." Roland told something of his stay. Marie filled in the blanks.

"Go home," she said. "You are a nice boy. Go to your nice people. Do not come back here until you are wiser and older. Go—write a letter to your friend—Mistaire Browane—he of the red, red nose. Tiens! so red!"

She laughed gustily. A merry, good-hearted soul, who should have been hostess in some country inn; a mother of sturdy sons and daughters. Grosse Marie knew the bitterness of her life. Her merry tongue never left her without friends.

"Go," she said. "Get away early."

"I think I will do as you advise." Roland rose suddenly, calling for his bill.

"I think so." His mind was made up now. "I am very tired of it. I will go. Since you know my friend by sight, will you give a *garçon* this note for him."

"Too willingly," said the stout German, gaily. "Adieu, monsieur, and a fair voyage."

Roland wrote his note, passed through the wheeling doors through which the tide was rushing in, the froth of the underworld, glittering, tuned to merriment. Poor froth which must one day be left stranded on the sands of time, and ooze down into them under its little crust of hopeless protest.

He walked to the hotel, locked his door, wrote to the guide and mentor.

"Dear Lance,—I must get back to England. I am tired of this. A thousand thanks for sparing me so much time," and a cheque enclosed for one hundred pounds. A golden egg of fair weight, but what use to Lancelot since the goose had squawked and winged away.

The gracious, merry city dropped out of sight on a murky autumn morning, long before Lancelot woke. The train flashed through flat rich lands; past silver

rivers, rimmed by silver green osiers, past the hideous hoardings of the advertisers, mercifully fewer than in England, on to Calais.

A grey, choppy sea shook the packet in its restless hands, flung it from crest to crest, showed what that patch of channel can be to poor sailors, until the white cliffs of Dover rose in a thin drift of mist.

Where now? Roland drove to the Ritz, the emptiness of loneliness upon him. He would not go back to the Court. He did not want to meet Lord Hume, and it was dull to be alone.

Shopping had lost its charm. Women were no longer mystical, fancy-like creatures, to be watched with amazement. He would go to a play, then supper. Roland had grown to look upon supper as a necessity, as much as dinner or breakfast.

He suddenly remembered Lancelot's friends, took out the girl Violet's address. Wrote there apologetically, sending it by messenger.

"That handsome boy is back again," said Miss Deering, reading the note. "Loo, this may mean business. Let's go slow."

"Go slow on your own," said Miss Rosie, tersely. "You don't expect me to do gooseberry, do you, without a boy for myself."

"But she came, being good-natured, and fond of supper. They were both well dressed; they struck with a note of simplicity when contrasted with Lancelot's friends. Roland paid them the tribute of too great a respect.

Loo was all for joking, making the evening merry. Violet caught the boy's mood. She was demure, simple, somewhat appealing. It was hard to live—so hard to get a footing in this great London.

Loo spied an acquaintance. She left the two at the supper-table.

Violet's narrow eyes looked into Roland's sweetly. She foresaw possibilities. She was dressed in white, her fair hair smooth under a fillet of velvet.

"It is so hard to earn enough," said Violet, crunching sweets with her strong, pointed teeth. "This supper is a great thing for me, Sir Roland. There are heaps of people one could not come out with, you see."

He asked her for the next night, eagerly for lunch next day.

"If I can get a friend to come." She dropped her eyes. "You must not think, Sir Roland, because I'm in the chorus that I'm not particular."

She was a rest to him, this shy, demure little worker, whom an older man would have seen through in five minutes. Fresh confidences then from Violet. A crippled sister, kept in the country from the scanty earnings. Little fables of hard work and bitter toil; more natural comments on her fellow-workers.

"Jealous cats," said Violet, impressively. "Rosie, there, is a good soul, but then, of course, she's a lady too; it does make a difference."

"A lady too." Oh, shadows of the general shop down near Whitechapel, outside which Violet had won her first applause dancing and singing. Memory of the stout fat mother who had abused her daughter for contemplating the stage. They could have told tales down there of the girl with the rippling golden hair, who used her pretty self as a stepping-stone to her advancement, trampling it down remorselessly so that the owner could climb a little. Levi, the fair Jew in the pawnshop, knew how Violet got those brooches and ear-rings and then laughed at him. Harris, who kept the draper's

shop further west, frowned irritably when he looked at certain lengths of silks and sparkling gauzes. Violet paid in her own coin, but she went her own way when she had got what she wanted.

A lady too. Better the gay good-for-nothings of Paris for Roland than this narrow-eyed girl of twenty-two, who measured him with her blunt-fingered hands.

Yes, she would lunch to-morrow if Rosie would come. To the Ritz—if he liked. Violet's eyes sparkled. She had never been inside the big hotel.

" She was so tired in the mornings," she said plaintively " Worn out after the hot theatre."

A basket of fruit for them again—sweets, anything Roland could get.

" Well? " said Loo Hildebrand as they got into the taxi, and she received a sudden flow of instruction from her friend.

Roland lay awake, thinking of the little girl who worked so hard. A mere chorus girl, but so sweetly particular, so gentle and so good.

People turned to look at his guests next day. They were so frankly out of place. Their hats beehives of brilliancy, mock jewels flashing on their gay blouses. So prepared to be unimpressed, so uneasily at ease, that they satisfied Roland. Violet drank hock, refusing champagne; striking the plaintive note of her hard life for all she was worth.

Roland took her on to tea. He bought her a great, fluffy boa which she stood and coveted, and she refused it unless he let her pay.

He apologized, begged her to take it, yet was secretly pleased when she said she must send him the money. She rested Roland now after his mad plunge of gaiety.

He went to see her dance and sing; cursed the gay,

scanty dress she appeared in. Poor little soul, to have to toil like that.

Three days after he had come back to London, the two lunched with him again, at the Carlton this time.

Violet wore the boa. Rosie was in a gown she had bought at a dress agency, a Paris model, gorgeous to behold.

"Mother, look," a girl's voice called in amazement, "I do believe it's Roland—over there."

Agatha quietly gowned in blue, more grown up, prettier, some of her lumpiness gone.

"Gracious! with those two—persons. How dreadful!"

"Oh, mother, I'll call him over here."

"Certainly not, Agatha. It could not be thought of." The girl would have run across, spoken to Roland, and perhaps the blotted page of his life would never have been written. Her fresh girlishness, her true breeding, would have shown him in a second what these two girls were. But Agatha *must* not—must not go near Roland.

"The people are impossible, Agatha. Roland ought not to be here with them. Stay quiet."

"I would like to speak to him, mummie. They're only actresses." Big Agatha hesitated obstinately.

"Tony, speak to Agatha."

Mr Lessingham looked and spoke promptly. "You shut it, Ag," he said briefly. "Your cousin would not like you to go to talk to him, you silly. Poor blighter," said Tony, in pitying tones. "When did the Deering get hold of him, I wonder?"

"We'll see if we can find him, Agatha. We'll ask him to dine, and I'll speak to him afterwards," said Lady Cosway.

The advent of the impossible persons did not in the least prevent Ruth Cosway from hoping Agatha's attractions might still prove stronger than theirs.

"It was just what was to be expected. Just what that foolish Clive prepared the poor boy for," she said to Tony in the hall. "It really was a shame. I shall write to Clive to-night."

She did pointedly, with no loss of impression on each line how Roland was in the worst of hands. "No one even warned him," scrawled Lady Cosway, bitterly. "It was cruel—cruel—to think of bringing up a boy as you did, Clive. There he is a prey for every harpy whom he meets. Good heavens! he was looking at the girl—a dreadful person, I understand—as if she were an angel. He looks worn, dissipated."

Sometimes three lines, and sometimes even four, as the black indictment was set forth. To be read by an old man who stormed and raved to the great detriment of his heart cure, and wrote imperatively to Basling, pleadingly to Hume.

He could not go to London. He was too ill. "Go, go and save the boy. My God, he might even promise marriage," he wrote, "for I see my madness now."

Violet's flat was full of flowers and sweets and fruit. Roland liked her, was grateful to her. Then, laughing, she proposed a change of plan. He should sup with her. Eat something stupidly bad, cold, and a hot dish made by Rosie.

Then it would be on Sunday, this supper. Would he take her out of London on Sunday? Somewhere for the day. Down to Oxford. She wanted to see it. "In a motor. Oh, no, they'd go by train. Drive there, and get back for supper."

A glorious, fine day for their expedition. The trees painted in sheen of russet and brown and gold; the Thames silver in his meadows.

The land of confidence was dug deeply now. As they walked in the stately town, sat out in the gardens, Violet told Roland of many things. Of the temptations of a girl's life. Of men depraved, horrible, who followed poor chorus girls, merely to take them up and drop them again; making the boy furious for the girl's sake. And then of other men, honourable but impossible, who wanted to marry her. "But if one did not love—it was so hard. Even for others' sakes," sighed Violet. "There's one I shall have to take, I suppose, Sir Roland, for the sister is worse now and needs more money. He keeps a place in New Oxford Street, and has a house out beyond Kensington." The picture Violet drew of elderly, worthy, bald, unattractive manhood was artistic and blackly repulsive. "Do you think I ought to, Sir Roland?"

"Oh, no, if you do not love him. No, Miss Deering. Marriage is for always."

"Sometimes," said Violet, dryly, frowning a little. They dined at the Mitre, plainly, but well. Then, trains were few on Sundays, theirs was at nine. The next too late.

"We'll walk to the station. I want to keep it to the end. Not to forget this perfect day." Violet walked slowly, stopping now and again.

"We had better hurry. We shall be late."

"Oh-h!" a shriek of pain from the girl. She had slipped, twisted her ankle, could not move a step. And when Roland tried to put her into a fly, stood sobbing as the train rushed in and by.

" Oh, the pain—the pain." No, she would not have a doctor, but she would lie down.

Roland was sent for, to see the injured foot bound round, to find Violet still weeping softly.

" What will Loo say? I can't go back to-night. She'll never live with me again. I shall be disgraced. She'll tell the others."

" But as you hurt your foot," he stammered.

" They won't believe it. I must dance on it to-morrow night or lose my place." Violet wept again into a handkerchief carefully damped.

" You're so good. You don't understand. It's not as if we were engaged. Then, of course—"

Poor fly—straight into the trap. Would any man be brute enough to stand back now, though it was no fault of his. To let this gentle, pretty thing be slandered on his account.

" Then say we are—if—if you will, Violet."

Roland, stammering, half afraid the girl might refuse him.

" Oh, Roland, you mean it. Do you mean it? "

It appeared then that Violet had loved him from the first. That happiness had flown down to her straight from heaven, and that also he must immediately leave her room and she would hobble to a sitting-room. Here, having hobbled miraculously well, she laid the golden head on Roland's shoulder, and helped him to kiss her.

Her slenderness was a little bony, but she was supple, scented, enough to make a boy's head reel. He was proud of her. Told her of the old Court, of the other places he could take up and live in.

" Yes—that's too far away," said Violet, decisively.

" Too far away! From what? "

"From London. You've seen so little, dear. I thought you'd like to live in a town. To travel—a lot. I want to go to Monte in the spring, and Cannes. And Egypt in the winter. You could get a nice yacht, Roland, and we'd have a party."

"A yacht. Yes, that would be a great idea." Its cost was no object.

"My cousin Agatha and her mother might come," he said. "Lady Cosway."

"The Countess of Cosway. Oh, they won't take me up at first, you know," said Violet; she was not so particularly anxious for the joys of society. "Later, I suppose."

"Why should they not?" he said stoutly. "On what grounds?"

Violet suggested spite and jealousy, and then fell back to her fables hastily, fearing she went too fast.

Her entrance to London next morning was triumphal. Notice given to the theatre; she had hurt her foot, and could not dance—was going to be married also.

A drive in the afternoon to Tenson's, and the choosing of a glorious ring. Roland's choice was of a sapphire deep as the shadows of the sea.

Violet took a great single stone diamond. "Diamonds are always money," she said flippantly.

"Always, madam." The salesman was called away, and another came. Violet flushed and grew pale. Levi, the little Jew, selling here, eyeing her shrewdly and with malice. She had promised once that she would marry him.

"Always money, madam," he said, with veiled insolence. "There is a necklace here; turquoises and diamonds. It would become you well."

" Oh, too expensive," Violet gushed at it. " You mustn't spend all your money on me, Ro. Don't you pretend you know me," she hissed at the smiling shopman.

It meant, of course, the necklace, and a pendant to match. And then a set of stars for Violet's hair.

" And if I don't," leered Levi. " I've got letters of yours, Vi."

" Come round and see me," said Violet over a tray of jewels, flashings glittering, sending out rays of pink and blue and green.

She was late at the Carlton that afternoon. Violet suggested a speedy marriage, for caught birds sometimes escape. And Roland waiting in the hall sprang to his feet with a cry.

" Agatha! " he said.

Agatha, big and quiet and girlish, her mother with her.

" My dear Roland. Now, is not this nice? "

Standing talking to them some blindness slipped from his eyes.

" You might meet people not of your own class." Hume's words came back to him. Caste cried to caste.

Violet in all her bravery never looked like lumpy Agatha. He shivered a little as if afraid.

" Oh, Roland, where have you been? You never wrote—never came—to us. What have you been doing? " said Ruth Cosway.

Where had he been? What had he been doing? He flushed unhappily.

Plunging in mad folly, striving to learn all the ways of the world in a month. Letting the swing of the pendulum sweep him into a bath of mire. But—he had

come out of it. Honourable marriage was before him. They would meet Violet. He watched the door.

"Come and sit down, Roland. We have engaged some tables over here. Oh, Mr Lessingham—Sir Roland Mainwaring—Captain Blake—Miss Reeves."

"B'lieve I travelled up with you once," said Tony.

Roland remembered, laughing; then with a sharp sigh. It was the day of his embarkation for liberty.

They talked easily, carelessly. Talked in the accent he had always known. He seemed to fall from strange worlds into home.

But then— A vision of a face shaded by an outrageous deep blue hat; of Violet, sables over her blue dress, standing in the hall. He saw it and jumped up.

"I must go. I'm meeting someone here."

"Meeting— Oh!" Lady Cosway had seen. "I'm sorry, Roland."

"But—mayn't I bring her here? I'm going to marry her." He stood pale, uncomfortable. "A Miss Deering —an actress."

"To marry her! Oh, I'd like to wring Clive's neck," said Lady Cosway, in tones of rage.

"To be married, Roland. Big young Agatha jumped to her feet. "To—the girl you lunched with. Mayn't Roland bring her here, mummie?"

Tony Lessingham whispered rapidly. It was horribly uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, Roland." Ruth Cosway was genuinely. "But there are two girls of our party. If—I were alone, you see— If you wish it, Roland, I'll—I'll go and be introduced. But think better of it, dear boy, for Heaven's sake."

"Because she is an actress," he rapped out. "Poor Violet, surely acting is no crime."

"No, but— Where are you staying, Roland?"

"At the Ritz; thank you, I'll say good-bye, as—it—it may be better not to trouble you, Lady Cosway." The shy boy was a man now, with a man's cool self-possession.

He walked quickly to the glass doors.

"Oh, she's quite impossible, isn't she, Tony. What! Hssh! the girls might hear. Oh, it's dreadful."

Violet was ill-tempered, pettish, tossing her head, snapping at him.

It was as if he passed to another world, and he knew it; but this was his place. This girl was his charge. Honest, modest, even if out of his own class.

"I am sorry, Violet. I met my cousins and stayed talking to them."

"The fat woman—the big girl over there. Aren't they coming to talk to me, Roland?"

"They — she — Lady Cosway — is old-fashioned, Violet, dear. She has a prejudice against the stage."

"Oh—indeed—indeed!" Signs of an hysterical storm were in the offing. The biting of lips, winking of eyelids, fluttering colour. Violet drank no tea, crumbled her cake, put away her muffin.

She would like to go home. Beneath her outward storm her cold eyes were measuring Roland. It was the time for action. These people were no fools. There were certain episodes in her past life which could be too easily found out.

Her hand sought Roland's as they drove away.

She pulled her handkerchief out directly they got into the garishly furnished little flat. Imitation Sheraton, covered with tawdry brocade and fluffy silk cushions, flagons of scent and rolls of Ruban de Bruge. Translations of French novels thrust into corners. A half-open door giving a glimpse of an untidy bedroom, with a heap of dresses and ribbons and laces thrown on the bed.

The outburst frightened Roland.

He would let those people persuade him now to leave her. And she was compromised—her situation gone. Her good name would be trailed in the mud. Oh, if he left her now—if he did—

"I—never mean to leave you, Violet. Don't be absurd—I don't indeed."

For Roland felt he owed this girl his name. He was even proud in his folly of giving it to her.

"Then marry me—now—at once! Oh, I know I'm not of your world, but I worked hard. I lived straight." Violet played the innocent maiden almost feverishly. "The girls are laughing at me. Hilda Claire met me to-day, and asked me if it was really true; I'm only a chorus girl, you a gentleman," was rung in half a dozen keys, until Roland was bewildered.

Marry her—of course he would. In two days if she liked. Just time to get the special license. Or at a registry office.

Violet thought she would like to be married in church. She thought somehow that in her position she ought to like it. It sounded more in tune with her part.

It was as she liked. The only church Roland knew was the private one at the Court, where the curate came to say prayers.

As she liked. On Thursday, then. He would get the license in the morning.

And across continents, across England, the wires flashed, trying to save him. Lady Cosway had taken action on herself; wired to Lord Hume. Basling, greatly perturbed, was flying up to Town. He met Hume at Euston. They got out of the same train.

Hume was excited, struggling with a hearty anger.

"I knew—I knew how it would be. A prey to any clever woman. No, Basling, you must not rush off to the Ritz. We are to meet Mr Lessingham first. We want some facts to frighten this boy with. I don't think he'll give his name to the woman if there is what we think in her record."

There was enough and to spare. Companions at Frivoli gave information readily. A drive to Whitechapel elicited more.

"Bad—to the core—this girl; notorious in her small way."

"We know enough. We'll go to the Ritz now."

Hume drove there with Basling.

"Yes, Sir Roland Mainwaring was in, but leaving immediately." The suave official looked meaningly at a girl in bright mauve, and a sable coat, the flash of diamonds at her throat, who was sitting on a sofa in the lounge.

"We will go to his room. You need not announce us."

They walked up the great stairway to the big room which Roland had engaged; knocked sharply and went in.

Roland was kneeling, stuffing his clothes into his trunk. He had not got a man.

He jumped up with a cry. "Basling! Hume! What is it? Is Uncle Clive—dead?"

"No, boy, he's painfully alive. Very painfully. Destroying the cure at Nauheim by thundering wires at us every hour. Roland, you never came to me after that first day. I sent here, tried to find you, and you vanished. Old man, dear boy, Ruth Cosway has told me of your engagement."

"Yes," said Roland, quietly; "oh, you've come about that."

"And it's impossible, Roland—impossible. You have your name to think of, youngster—your son's name."

"Roland,"—Basling, who had grown fatter, moved forward,—"Mr Mainwaring wired to me. My boy, I came at once. Old and stupid as I am—I wish you had taken me with you."

Roland looked into the two faces. Hume's—kindly, breeding stamped on it. On Basling's—and here again was the mark of birth — the something indefinable which no money can buy, and in one he saw liking and true regard, and in the other love.

"The girl is notorious, Roland. Look here, leave it to me. Money will fix the whole affair. Here, see these." He put some papers on the table. "Read these. You see, my boy, this is one of the things one must not do, because one owes oneself to futurity."

Roland's lips were dry. He moistened them with his tongue.

"Violet is an actress," he said, "but a lady. She comes from some town in the north; her father was—a clerk there; they sank, but—"

"She comes from Whitechapel, or near it," exploded Hume. "Her father is a pawnbroker—"

"Yes, Roland, I pray you." Basling laid thin, entreating fingers on Roland's arm. "My boy, because —we care so much."

Roland shook the touch off almost savagely. She came from Whitechapel. Violet had lied to him. But she was his wife; he had lifted her for ever from her work and her birthplace. She was innocent—a mere girl.

"You're too late," he rasped out. "I—was married this morning to Miss Violet Deering Jones. We are crossing to Paris to-night."

CHAPTER V

THE papers found the wedding out, and paragraphed it blithely. Another romance! Sir Roland Mainwaring of Lyme Regis, Worcestershire, had married Miss Violet Deering of the Frivoli. Huge sums had been paid to break the lady's contract, etc.

The mask of the hard worker and the innocent young girl had been flung off by Violet almost on her wedding-day. At first she affected love for Roland—love which laughed in its sleeve at his respect for his wife. He feared she might feel hurt because their wedding had been, as it were, a matter of circumstance rather than of love on his part. Poor Roland—his ears tingled as his wife let herself go. She viewed the loves of men and women from one standpoint only, and that was of mere animals.

Violet flung herself into the joys of spending. Their suite was a palatial one. A French maid, whom Roland thought impudently familiar, was engaged. Dresses and laces and furs and hats came in huge boxes. She was getting her trousseau now, she said carelessly.

Sables, ermine—more furs than she could wear. Model gowns, model hats and then—jewels.

Roland bought her some at first, but he reminded her of the Mainwaring diamonds and other jewels locked away in England.

"Bah! heavy things." Violet sniffed, and smiled at the suave shopmen. "Yes, I'll have that pendant—

that necklace. Come, Roly, you don't grudge them to Vi, surely."

He flushed at this public coaxing, stood mute as she bought.

Then she went off alone. He came in from a solitary morning to find a great rope of black pearls on the table—a glittering star of diamonds, one yellow in the centre beside it.

"I got these to-day, Roly. The man is waiting to be paid."

The bill was horrifying. Roland was putting away his boyhood, and he spoke plainly.

A burst then of hysterical anger—the first of many. A storm of shrill-voiced, vulgar rage.

"Oh, of course he didn't really care for her. He was paying her out this way—grudging her what she wanted." My lady sobbing on the sofa, Blanche administering sal-volatile, the jeweller's man contemplating the scene through the open door.

"Milady— Ah, it is wrong of monsieur. Ah, milady—you will be ill."

The cheque was signed—to be followed by many others—by assurances from bewildered Roland that he did love his wife.

Violet liked to come down to dinner with shoulders frankly bared; with the new rope of pearls on her neck; with diamonds, rubies, sapphires in her hair, on her wrists and fingers.

She designed a gown for the black pearls. Dead white, some transparent stuff, high to her throat, yet only an excuse for baring her neck down to the skin-tight lining, the huge black pearls shown up by diamonds sewn on the bodice showing in their dark richness.

People turned to stare. Because Lady Mainwaring looked so frankly what she was—a little vulgarian. Absolute simplicity might have toned her down, but in a dress of orange veiled in diamond-sewn deep blue, with a tiara in her puffed-out hair, with flash and sparkle of precious stones, she was almost ridiculous.

"Sir Roland and Lady Mainwaring. Oh, poor chap."

Tony Frensham, passing through Paris, saw the pair dining and read their names in the book. "Married to —that girl! I knew his father."

Kindly little Tony trotted across to Roland, the inevitable Agatha was in his mouth, his pointed nose was wrinkled with annoyance.

"Make myself known, Mainwaring, Lord Frensham. I knew your father—twenty years ago."

Roland was glad to see a friendly face—glad to break from the sick misery that was closing about him.

"Yes, close friends, y'know, as Job was in the Ark. I'm travelling across to Egypt to fetch my wife. She had to go out there for a fortnight."

"My wife," said Roland, turning to the vision in orange and blue. "Lord Frensham—Violet."

Violet fell to the mincing accent which she put on for state occasions. As he was here alone Lord Frensham must take dinner with them.

Tony's keen little eyes looked straight into the woman's mean soul. He listened as she talked grandly, he listened still, drawing her out quietly, as she drank champagne too lavishly, and striving to be grand, was Violet of the Frivoli—a coarse-tongued woman of her class. She told a story with a gay laugh. Tony saw Roland's cheeks scorch and he himself failed to laugh. The good looks Violet could boast of were bright eyes

and a good figure. Both would soon go—wiped out by champagne and liqueurs.

"It's jolly dull here," said Violet. "But to-day I saw two fellows I used to know. So it may brighten up. Hey! there they are. Hey! Freddie—Tots—I say, have you forgotten me?"

Two heavy-nosed, dark youths, with gorgeous diamond solitaires in their shirt-fronts, turned at the hail.

The room rang then to loud-voiced laughter, to jokes and stories. It was as if Violet stepped with relief from one land to another.

"What luck meetin' you two," she said. "I'll have a house in London soon and then I'll do you proud, I tell you."

Tony drew Roland on one side. "I'll see you in town then," he said kindly. "My wife will call on Lady Mainwaring."

Roland's young face set greyly. "If my wife cares to try to get into Society," he stammered. "She does not seem to think about it."

"Oh, poor boy, poor boy." Tony said good-night and went heavy-hearted to bed. He had seen this girl before—knew her as a friend of Willie Lawson's, of Tommy Dunston's. Two men he detested cordially.

Roland's letters were not pleasant ones next day. One was from the lawyer, gravely pointing out expenditure. All the savings of the minority were gone. Further living at this rate would mean mortgages—dipping into capital.

Roland was no fool. He went up to the hot sitting-room, where, in a gorgeous morning-gown, drenched in heavy scent, Violet was smoking cigarettes and talking to the two men she had met the night before. *Petit*

déjeuner was on the table; the men, who were joking and laughing at the door, were still in dressing-gowns, on the way to their baths.

"Christmas!" one said, and fled. The other, Freddie Levingham, grinned and remained.

"Royalty receives as in days of old," he said. "Our rooms are up here and milady called us as we passed. Apologies for lack of ceremony, Mainwaring, old boy."

Violet's dressing-gown was loosely fastened, the shimmering whiteness of her bared neck showed as she lounged back.

"Well, Sir Sour-face, what's amiss now?" she asked, pouring out her coffee. "Hang this rotten scheme of breakfast," she said irritably. "Better have it in bed straight away. I say, Roly, we'll *déjeuner* these boys out somewhere. Then I want— Freddie says he knows of a black pearl to wear with my string—a pear-shaped one."

Roland sent the maid for hot tea. He had not breakfasted. He handed his wife his letter; it was flung back—with a mutter.

How much had he got then? How much—?

"Roughly speaking," said Roland, "about twenty thousand a year, clear of all expenses. But"—he held out a cheque-book—"look here. Pearls, five thousand; diamonds, necklace, tiara and pendant, four; sables, a thousand; jewels yesterday, two hundred. And heaps more. It's half a year's income gone in a week," he said, "and it's impossible."

Violet's face was clouding, her hot temper rising. "Sell some of your hanged old pictures," she said. "You told me you've heaps. I can't be pinched and bothered—"

But Roland's strong face played its own part here. No. He would give Violet an allowance—two thousand a year—she must keep to that.

A burst of vulgar, hysterical anger—storms of tears. He did not love her. She wasn't going to be put upon—wronged—just because she was no one. A storm raging until Roland grew weary, finishing by a lurid burst of sunshine and arms about his neck—the only love which Violet knew of tried as a last resource—the soft body pressed against his—the painted lips on his own. "Roly, darling, you would not vex your little Vi?"

It left the boy steeped in absolute depression but quietly determined. He would not be ruined. Temper, tears, passion, all failed.

Surly ill-humour then. A *déjeuner* where the host was his wife's butt for sneering ill-humour. Plans made to enjoy Paris—with Violet's two friends.

There was a series of tableaux to be seen then—they'd do an artist's ball. Oh, Roly wouldn't take her. He was only a poor innocent.

"Will not take you or let you go," Sir Roland said quietly.

"Let me! You be hanged, Roly. Course I'm goin'. Go off now and see pictures, Roly. I'll go for a drive with these boys."

She left him hurt, bitterly miserable. Oh, fool! to have stepped into this trap. The pictures of the Louvre failed to soothe him. He had taken Violet there one day; she had wished she had the "sellin' of 'em, so she did."

"Lord! fancy hangin' the blighters up when you could blue the money," said Lady Mainwaring, looking at the canvases with scant patience. "An' you've got

some of this crowd, Roly, in your houses. Well, they're banks if one's hard up."

Violet was ill-pleased at heart. She had believed Roland to be a millionaire. Twenty thousand of spending money was nothing—nothing to this child of the streets who had drawn her three pounds a week and augmented it as best she could.

She grumbled to her friends. Lost one, and went strolling about with Freddie, the richer of the two.

"There's that pearl," she growled angrily. "I daren't cut for a few hundreds now. One must handle these young fools, Freddie, eh?"

They sat down in the Café de la Paix, ordering liqueurs. Over them Violet stretched the triumph of her marriage, until Freddie Levingham choked in his guffaws of joy.

"Told him it would injure your reputation. Yours! Oh, Vi, you are the limit."

In her rich dress and furs, her gorgeous hat—painted, tricked out, Violet was desirable. Freddie's hand fell on her arm.

"Come out—and get that pearl," he whispered. "Come on, Vi, old girl."

That night Roland saw a pear-shaped black pearl on his wife's neck.

"You bought the pearl," he said coldly.

"I changed some things for it. Don't you nag, Roly, boy," said Violet, gaily.

The days which followed were torture to Roland. He disliked Freddie Levingham, hated to find him taking *petit déjeuner* in Violet's sitting-room — to find him there in the evenings. Blanche, the maid, grew rich in those days, as she had hoped to in such a service.

Then one day Roland came in quickly—backed out

again, white and staggering. It could not be; there were not such women alive. She—his wife—to let another man kiss her. He went into his own room, standing there as one stricken. He heard Violet say something quickly next door—before she called him in—so sweetly he began to think he had been mistaken.

But he took her back to London next day; told her plainly why. He went to Hume and laid his story bare.

Knowing only too well, Hume comforted him. Kisses meant nothing in that rank of life. Even if Violet had erred once she was a wife now, would probably be a good one. Roland must do his best.

A few days of hope — Violet established in a big house in Eaton Place—then the tempers beginning anew. One day Lord Hume meeting her in a Bond Street tea-shop had not introduced her to the woman he was with.

She flung out at Roland that evening. Oh, she wasn't good enough for Roland's pals. She was no one. Only a chorus girl—to be told lies of—traduced.

And then next day she was off with her own friends, to her own haunts, declining to meet Lady Frensham at lunch.

"For which, a special note of thanksgiving," said Tony, gravely. "As Haman said, you know, when they pulled him alive out of the Lion's Den."

"Quite so," said his wife gravely.

Roland came back to his own people, the few he cared to see. Violet trailed into a world where her title carried weight.

"Roland, it was too cruel." Ruth Cosway looked at the boy's drawn face. "You were given no chance. You naturally believed in anyone—who cared to take you in."

"That was it," he said dully. "I was a mere duckling under a magpie's bill, with brains ready for the picking."

"But, it must all come right some day, Roland," she said vaguely.

"How?" he smiled drearily. "I should rather like to be a monk now, Cousin Ruth, for I have tasted my folly all in one dish and got rank indigestion. I rushed at the world and hugged it, taking glare for colour, noise for music, every woman who was not palpably evil for an angel. And the worst of it was, there was something in my heart which rebelled against it all. If I had been brought up as ordinary boys are, I believe I should have steered clear of the underworld completely."

"The worst of it is," said Ruth Cosway, "that you will fall in love. You will see a woman and know suddenly that you adore her. Men like you, Roland, always take love so heavily."

"As if it was the measles," he said. "All my measles and whooping-cough and natural ills of childhood were kept away from me, Ruth, so that if I get them now it will probably be badly. My wife," he said, "is lunching with one Van Delt, a financier with untold millions, who is to give her tips about stocks and shares." His face set bitterly.

Ruth Cosway coughed and fidgeted. She knew what people said about Lady Mainwaring and the financier. "Yes, Roland," she began, "he's a man—with—rather—a reputation—"

The face which looked up at her was very old, with all its boyishness wiped out.

"You need not tell me," he said very quietly, "the woman has dragged my name through the mire since a

week after our marriage. But—I cannot face publicity. I cannot bear the laughter at that young ass, Roland Mainwaring. Violet must go her own way."

"Oh, my dear, it can't be as bad as all that," said Ruth Cosway, shocked.

"Perhaps it may not be. I may exaggerate."

But, as he walked to the house he called home, through murk of London's cold and chill of London's fog, with the traffic's roar thunderous in the gloom, he knew that he did not. He had married a woman who knew no laws save those of getting what she wanted, whose greedy soul would covet some jewelled toy, and coveting—not rest until it was hers.

Debts grew as snowballs; there were heaped boxes of dresses and furs and laces; if people would not know Lady Mainwaring, at least they must look at her.

If Roland remonstrated, it meant an outburst, tears, hysteria—her ladyship frustrated, and maids rushing for salts, for brandy-and-soda—a telephone message to the suave physician who knew how lady patients are retained

"A delicate organism—a mass of nerves—Lady Mainwaring must *not* be agitated, Sir Roland. You must really see to it." This before the half-fainting lady, who would shiver and sob at intervals. "Now we must give her a soothing draught. Go out to-night? Oh, a little amusement will be only beneficial. But—*no* agitation."

So Roland would give in—perhaps buy the coveted jewel—with a grim look at his bank-book.

Sometimes he made a stand—refused to buy—endured the scene and gave scant sympathy. Then one day, after an hour's futile shivering—hot anger flung down assumed hysteria—the room reeked of brandy—

Sir Soothely Grate was out—and had not come to the call.

Shrieking shrilly, Violet let herself go. Laughed at Roland, seared him with cruel words. Fool, who had been caught as some pigeon might have been. Fool, to have believed a word she said to him.

Careless of herself if she could make him writhe—she laid her whole plot bare—told him what she had been—how he had wearied her with his inane boy's caresses—how his very touch bored her.

"You're not grown up now," she shrieked, "you poor, soft sawny."

"It is enough for to-day." Roland went out of his wife's room, tingling with shame and humiliation. In his own room he happened to see his despatch-case holding the papers which Hume had brought to him on his wedding-day. Short, concise, a detective's damning evidence, gathered together with the fact and date. And these words were written of the woman he had married because his late stay at Oxford might have injured the fair fabric of her reputation.

"That poor boy, what an impossible person he picked up." This as Violet trailed her rich dress up the supper-room at the Savoy. Some mixture of daring colours, with flash of rare embroideries and glimmer of jewelled laces on it. Shoulders and neck bared to the utmost. A shoulder-strap—no more—would hold the corsage in its place.

"Not cut it down, Blanche?" she would say to her maid. "I hate your semi-demi nonsenses. Cut the rotten thing away. What if you do spoil the stuff a little; they won't look too much at these green butterflies—they'll look at me."

A sable cloak flung on the back of the chair, the

glitter and radiance of many jewels and Violet saw the looks turned on her as she sank into her chair.

A train of men with her. Van Delt—big, fleshy, red-faced, completely unattractive. His false teeth flashing against a dyed black moustache. A coarse-tongued, coarse-minded old man, but rich. How rich!

Then the skeleton at the feast. Sir Roland, quiet, neither eating nor drinking. Voted, not without cause, dull and stupid. Making excuse as soon as he could to get away and sit in the palm court.

Cissie Frensham, seeing him, bowed in sheer pity to Violet.

Violet let her pass, then, "Good-evening, my lady." The sharp voice breaks out shrilly, "Oh, how kind of you, my lady, to *deign* to incline your head to me. Ta, ta, my lady countess." Violet blew imaginary kisses until Roland's cheeks were hot with misery. "You can't say your friends have much to do with your wife, have they, Roly?"

"I do not think you want them to," he said unhappily.

"Not the dull crowd, you know. Hang them!"

"The wretched woman must be intoxicated. I really believe she kissed her hands to me," said Cissie Frensham. "Tony, I do not drink at this hour, but I must have a whisky-and-soda or I shall faint."

"No, not her, like Lot's wife, Cis. She couldn't have meant it for you."

"But I mean to be presented," said Violet, "and knock all these ugly cats with my dress and my diamonds." She smiled at Van Delt. "I'll have emerald green, I think, embroidered with violets in beads, all shining. They can't refuse Sir Roland Mainwaring's lawful wedded wife, can they?"

Roland feared that they could and would. But he said nothing.

"Roland," his wife looked at his downcast face. "Cheer oh! sonny, drink champagne. And, Roly, I want that new car to drive in."

Roland bit off a groan; the new car was a lumbering thing with every species of elaborate arrangement which could be thought of and never used. Luncheon baskets, fixed and difficult to get at—clocks, lights, flower vases, Bridge tables.

"It's too dear," he said, leaving them as soon as he decently could.

Ruth Cosway was supping near the door—Agatha, Hume and Tony Frensham with her.

How fresh and pleasant Agatha looked. How different his life would have been if he had married her. And yet—it would have been unfair, for he could never have really loved her.

"I'm going down—to get some quiet," Roland said, looking back towards the noisy crowd about his wife.

"Old chap, it's working very badly." Hume came down to him.

"Badly is scarcely the word," said Roland, "but since I made my own grave I must lie in it."

"Roland, why not take her away? Travel appeals to Violet. She must want to know people. Tour round the world."

"Take a tour round the world!" Roland looked up with a gleam of hope, for it would at least be a change. Sights of new towns, new people, glow of colour, constant movement.

He owed it to his wife. He must try.

Thinking it all over, with every instinct rebellious.

Clean-souled, clean-natured, cruel Fate had flung him into a bath of mire.

Then coming home next day exalted, with youth's power of hope upon him, with his mind made up. He would try this change. "Where was her ladyship?"

"Out, Sir Roland. She had left a note."

A scented thing, within a thick heliotrope paper, a violet stamped upon it.

Inside, a few lines in the scrawling, ill-educated hand.

"I've gone off with Paul Van Delt. I couldn't stand your meanness any longer. Get a divorce and he'll marry me. We're travelling in the car you wouldn't buy for me. Good-bye, you poor softy.—VIOLET."

So this was the end of exaltation—of new hope. Sir Roland shut the letter up—rang the bell. A butler of Violet's choosing answered it.

"I am leaving London, Rawlings. Dismiss all the servants. Pay them. Mr Grantham will call and arrange with you."

It was the curtain down on the first act of a life spoiled by an old man's folly. Roland went grey-faced, quietly, up Piccadilly to the Carlton Club and found Hume there.

"Violet has left me. A hundred thousand a year sent twenty spinning upwards in the scales."

"You'll divorce her, Roland. It is a great relief."

"I shall not. My freedom is no use to me now and she shall not have hers so easily. Good-bye, Hume. I have to thank you for many kindnesses."

On to the office of one of the liners. A ticket taken to Freetown.

"He is going to West Africa," said Hume next day. "I've seen him again."

"West Africa! Oh, why?" said Ruth Cosway.

"He says—to see the place—that he wants to go up country and shoot. But if you ask me—he wants to die there," said Hume, bitterly.

He was not altogether ri[illegible] The ship threshed out across a grey wintry sea [illegible]he surf-bound, lovely land of greenery and death, [illegible]h its lush growth, its steamy mists, its flashing of jewelled birds and butterflies, and growth of brilliant flowers, with its rivers of swamps and festering pollution, all slime below the arching mangrove stems, and thin smell of marigolds on the beer-coloured waters.

Out there because they called it the White Man's Grave, and Roland was taking it as his trial by ordeal. If he died there, stricken by fever, then he had sinned too much in his folly and his life was not wanted. But if he lived, then some day he would come back again and take up his life in England in the homes of his forefathers.

"You are going to prospect, shoot—see the place?" A grizzled man spoke to Roland of the land they were coming to.

"Yes. I suppose there is game to be killed there."

The grey-haired man smiled drearily. "There is much to be killed there, Mainwaring. Hope, ambition, energy, youth—the land resembles an evil, heartless woman, flashing in splendour of clothing, her heart a mass of slime, and sucking out a man's heart's blood. I make a scanty living there, driving natives hard, gather-

ing the rubber vines, trading a little. But since I have nothing else I must go back to it. This trip should be my last."

"You go home for good, then?" Roland asked.

"No, I shall stay there for good," said Paul Hesling, smiling. "Six feet by three, scraped out hastily by sweating niggers. Dead at eleven, buried by two. It is the law of the land. You must go carefully there, Mainwaring, for there are human sharks as well as those outside the bars, and with humanity there is no black fin up to warn us. There are corners up-country from which white men do not come back, nor do they die by fever."

Hesling was nearly forty, old for his years. A friendship grew between boy and man.

Hesling seldom spoke of women. He was clean-minded, clean-lived. When he did it was carelessly, without subtle grin and appraisement. They were fellow-creatures to him—not mere empty moulds of flesh and blood, with every limb to be criticized—since to some men women are only born for one object.

Hesling had a mother and sisters. He talked of their patient poverty; their dull struggle for existence in the small provincial town. One a typist, one a governess, tramping to her work in all weathers, and of his gentle mother who had never grumbled since a fraudulent solicitor's robbery had killed Paul's father and beaten his wife and children down into the grey sea of those who eat and breathe but do not live.

As, in the rose flush of the dawn, they were called up to see the land, Roland made a proposal. The greenly-wooded shores were rising, dreamlike in their beauty; the thunder of the surf was soft music so far off. Mists

and distance hid the festering evil of river mouths. Mountains nosed into the sky; the white houses, with the clearings about them, began to stand out in the thin light.

"Hesling, I am alone here," the boy said quietly. "Could this foreman of yours see to your place, if you had something else to do—something which would pay for any loss?"

"Of course he could. He is fairly honest in his way."

"Then come with me. I'll see this place and then if I'm alive we'll travel on. India—America—across half the world, Hesling, but out of the beaten track." Roland named a salary diffidently. It scarcely seemed enough to him.

Hesling stood gripping the rails; his eyes were moist. "I'd have gone for nothing, Mainwaring," he said, "but—this—this— Man, have you thought what it means to them at home? Rest for those two girls. Gracie is only twenty-five. Peace for my mother and for me—the power to save."

The true value of money was with Roland for the first time. The right to help those who struggle, the power to help. Not a thing to fling and waste on every toy one coveted, but a gift to use wisely when rich men willed it.

Before he left Freetown he saw a lawyer there, making arrangements so that even if he died, Hesling would have the same salary for five years.

So the two passed from the busy town up into the heart of Africa.

CHAPTER VI

A GREAT train roared on its journey from New York to Canada. Huge as it was, a mere speck in the mighty world it crossed. Towering cliffs reared up, looking down on the intruder which had scrabbled its path at their feet and along their sides. The line was a puny thing, but working onward, ever onward, to show what pigmy man can do.

"Paul, I am half inclined to get out and go into this country."

"You would not find much to do, Roland. Now that we are getting into the agricultural centres—sit quiet and admire."

Roland was tanned and lean. The horror of his boyish plunge into life had been wiped out by open spaces. His eyes had the keen look of the man who may depend upon their quickness for his life. He moved lightly, as one whose taut muscles rippled under the silky skin of perfect condition.

Africa had laid her damp hands on him and let him go. He had wandered to the coast-line between surf and dense green wall—had penetrated into the dank bush—gone up the beer-coloured, foul rivers, and then, still whole, felt the whole world was for him and Paul.

They had been in strange places together. On evil-smelling, vermin-haunted junks, with the smooth yellow-faced crew ready to murder them if they could foresee hope of gain.

Hesling knew how to win through. "Payee double when land—see. No money here. Allee gone. Friend waitee for us." Hesling could speak in pidgin-English —could rant in African—break into Japanese.

They had been in India—up beyond where the tiny forts mark the might of England, and, a few men in each, hold the Empire safe. To where eternal snows veil the great hills, and there are strange old monasteries, and men who hold life as a mere sigh, its passing nought.

Cases of heads and skins went home to England—those of big deer—and of little, slender-legged beasts. Skins of tigers, and a lion's; the great cats which are better dead than caged, to make sights for the sons and daughters of smoky cities.

They went in a tramp steamer through the exquisite waters of the Pacific, where the flying-fish rise from the blue sparkle of the sea, and the coral islets, inside their bar of surf, are a fret of pink and white about their golden beaches.

To Florida with its wonderful colouring—to the chill shores of northern climes, ice-bound and grim and wonderful.

To Japan, the land of toy houses, so fresh and clean. They had seen it when the plum orchards were a froth against the sky, and the almonds flung their spikes up in a glory of rose flush. Seen the mountains, the wondrous distances of the interior.

Coming back, taking tea in a garden in Tokio with little dainty *geishas* waiting deftly, handing the fragile cups or the bright lacquer trays. Roland had looked suddenly interested.

"Paul—over there. What a lovely girl."

A tall, English girl, standing outlined against a froth of pink-and-white blossom. Looking gently, a little

sadly, at the toy beauty of the tea-gardens, the tiny trees in tubs, outside the many-roomed house. The brightly-dressed attendants, little human butterflies, fluttering among the flowers.

She was fair, restful—very graceful, all in white, a plain black cross pinned on her dress; pearls about her neck. And Roland looked, almost wistfully. Given his chance, he might have met and loved a girl of this stamp and class. He could not take his eyes from her.

"Yes, mother," the girl turned to speak to a pretty woman near her. "It is all beautiful."

"Just like a scene in the Gaiety," said the elder woman brightly. "If they would only sing and dance a little."

The two went out of the garden, back to their hotel. Yet, often, as he travelled on, Roland recalled the sweet, pale face, the gentle, half-sad face of the girl in Japan.

And so—learning quickness, resource, flinging boyhood behind, each day making him love Paul better, Roland threw the past behind him.

"I am half minded to go home, Paul." Roland looked at his mail; letters directed and re-directed from banker to banker. "Lyme Regis is unlet. Shall we go and camp out there—you and I?"

Paul's home news had been pleasant lately. One sister had married, the second was engaged. Money had cleared away the weeds from young lives choked by poverty. It had given the old woman the right to rest and dream through her last days.

"I wish we had got out, Paul, further back." Roland leant out, as the train swooped across a bridge held on the edge of a great precipice. Far down, a mere thread of dark water, broken by sparkles of silver, the torrent rushed through the canon—the train seeming to lean

over the glistening, sheer walls of rock, to stagger giddily upon the edge.

A girl came down the corridor, swaying a little as the train rocked. She slipped, and fell against Roland, muttering apology.

"I am so sorry. The line must be uneven here," she said quietly.

"Yes, it is, I think. I hope we do not jolt over the edge of this." He moved back and started. It was his lady of Japan, the girl he had seen in the Tokio gardens, her pale, fair beauty outlined against a pink cloud of almond blossom.

Slenderly built, yet never thin; now, as then, the childish purity of her deep, grey eyes struck him with a keenness which hurt. She wore the same string of pearls, the same black cross hanging from it. If he had met a girl like that, and could have met her as a free man.

"It does look dangerous," she said, looking out. "Is it not wonderful to have made a railway here."

Lady Grace Knox, her pretty grey hair waving about her fresh face, came staggering behind her daughter.

Roland moved back, but one of his letters, fluttering in the wind, fell at Lady Grace's feet—the address uppermost.

"Dear me," said that lady, reading it frankly. "Sir Roland Mainwaring," she turned, smiling. "A friend of yours, Sir Roland, Lord Hume, is *my* greatest friend. We often talk of you. I am Lady Grace Knox, and this is my daughter."

"How my left ear must burn then," he said, smiling a smile of quick delight. Chance had made friendship possible. He could talk to Margaret Knox, watch the pale, pure face, hear her speak.

Paul Hesling drew in his lips, and sighed a little.

"You've been travelling round the world, haven't you?" chattered Grace. "Our seats are right back, but there's no crowd, and we were going into lunch. I'm sure we could find a table for four."

There are certain arguments which always prevail. Used lavishly now, they procured the table for four, and stimulated the wrath of a plethoric South American to the verge of apoplexy. He was quite sure that the table was his. The smiling black conductor was equally sure it was mistake fo' certain, sah. A silver dollar is good, but a crisp note for five is far better.

The drawbacks of eating upon a train were with them; grittiness in the butter; soda-water which will be flat; a faint taste of smut and smoke.

"You are going back to England?" Roland asked. "I am thinking of going there soon."

"We go by the *Europa*," said Margaret. "We just catch it by this train."

"I shall go by it," said Roland, calmly.

"Yes? We've been out staying with friends. Margaret was not very well." Her mother looked lovingly at the fair, quiet girl. "She is too serious, sometimes, Sir Roland, this girl of mine. Went slumming, in the heat, nursing little crippled children in awful dens. So we came away. It's not right for so young a girl."

Margaret. Rare pale Margaret. How well the name suited her.

"I am twenty-four, mother," Margaret smiled softly. There was sadness in her smile, a fleeting trace of some memory which would not let her be merry. Some thoughts which no one knew of, seemed to lie behind the smooth, white forehead.

Rush of the great train onward—ever onward—

shrill scream of whistle, taste of smut and drift of grit on their long journey, but to Roland, enchantment.

Love had come to him in the tea-gardens; it stayed with him now. The minutes were hours when Margaret was not there. He schemed with true lover-like transparency to make opportunities to see her.

And, having known only the women of the underworld, he was afraid of Margaret. Her grave purity, her girlish gentleness, almost frightened him. Sometimes when she flushed, and her eyes flashed, he would think her human as himself. Then, next minute, the vague sadness would banish the flash of mischief, and she was angel again, far above him.

"Oh, Paul, if I were free, if I were free," he said to his grey-headed friend.

"You can be free. You can divorce the other woman."

"But—Margaret— Would she recognize divorce? She said the other day that only death could sever those vows to God. Promises to humanity, those may be set aside, but these vows are to high heaven."

"Poor Heaven," said Paul, grimly. "How it must smile, when sometimes the vows are made in earnest."

"Ask her, Roland," he said. "Ask her if divorce will not do—"

"I—am afraid. She is so good, Paul. I have known her for a day and a half."

"It seems to me," Hesling looked out at the grey night hurrying past the windows, "that Margaret Knox has some trouble which haunts her; sometimes she sits still and thinks, and I've seen her whole face contract, and seen her grow hot-cheeked as if from shame at something she could not forget."

"She was engaged—at seventeen or eighteen. Her

lover died the day before their wedding," said Roland. "Lady Grace told me of it. He was upset out of his car two days before, and died unconscious. Lady Grace, though, says that Margaret was not very devoted to him, though she felt it terribly. Later she went away for a long time. Went alone with an old governess, saying she could not bear to see her people for a time."

"If Miss Knox will not recognize the freedom which the law can give you from that woman who trapped you, I am almost sorry that you have met her," said Hesling, thoughtfully.

"Sorry. I shall never be that, Paul. Old man, if it could be, there's a small house down there at Lyme Regis. Your mother could have it. You could be secretary. And Margaret—"

With a snort of triumph the great train plunged into a maze of tunnels, of cross lines, of high houses; the flurry of the station was with them. Checks given up for luggage. People rushing and talking as if loud voices must hasten them. Cool Americans, orderly even in haste. Perspiring Britons, splendidly autocratic. Fat Germans, nudging the crowd aside. Gesticulating French people. Women alone, taking every man's hand as being against them.

"Get the traps, Paul. I'm off to the ship. We must get on her anyhow. In the hold—the steerage."

Down to the coolness of the quay, with its tangle and mass of ships. Past huge warehouses, monster cranes dipping iron hands into the holds, clawing out giant bundles of merchandise.

The *Europa* steamed up; stood out against a rose-flushed sky.

The captain knew of no lover's eagerness; shook a resolute, grizzled head.

"There wasn't a state-room left, or a berth; they'd been full for a fortnight. But he bent before a lover's fiery storming. A sofa—a rug on deck, and for that the price of ten state-rooms, so that he travelled on this ship.

"But—the *Oriental* starts to-morrow, Sir Roland."

Roland used language towards the *Oriental* which might have set her on fire. "Get a policeman," he said, "I'm not going off. Oh, there they are."

Lady Grace was coming on board, and with her Margaret, tall and slim and fair, a quiet sadness on her face.

Captain Lea said "Oh!" pungently. It compassed a dozen sentences. He took a telegram from a boy.

"You can have your sofa, Sir Roland," he said dryly. "You won't feel the discomfort. What! two sofas! Oh, look here—" His face cleared.

"Mr Jones and sister are delayed. You can have their state-rooms," he said. "It saves me removing you forcibly," observed the captain, pleasantly, as he moved off to call the purser.

Calm weather held the restless sea; the long ocean rollers nosed across the waters, no curl of foam upon their crests.

The big ship's engines throbbed brave-heartedly; her prow set fair for the little island in the northern seas.

There was no scheming needed here. Through warm mornings, long afternoons, Roland was with Margaret and found the hours too short. There was so much to say, so many things to talk of. Books, towns, countries, but before all these things—since they were human and in love—themselves; the subject which cannot pale while love makes gods of men—themselves.

Shyly, with pale cheeks, she spoke of her own sorrow.

"And—did you love him very dearly?" They were racing through an amber twilight, leaning over the rail to see the sea slide back.

"No." Her eyes met his honestly. "I—I—know now that I did not, Sir Roland. He was fond of me." She shivered suddenly. "I was in love with love and the excitement of marriage—but—not otherwise. I was only a child."

"Yet—you've sorrowed for him ever since."

"I have never found anyone I cared for," she answered steadily. "Nor have I been implored to marry, Sir Roland. I am too quiet for this century."

Quiet. His rare pale saint. The fierce passion in him was a furnace held by the steel doors of infinite worship and respect. Her light dress clung about her, outlining her rounded arms, the lines of her body. Her warm, white throat was bare—bare where hot lips would love to dwell and stay on the cool satin flesh.

He would speak then—ask her. But as the words trembled on his lips, her mother called her.

"You have spoken, Roland?" Paul asked.

"No, not yet. But to-day I talked of my brief married life. Paul, how can two women be so different?"

"As lands are—as waters are," said Paul, dreamily. "A blue sea, clear on sparkling sands. A merry tarn, rushing clear-souled over a rocky bed, past drooping fern, past meadow-sweet and forget-me-not and heather. And a sullen, muddy tide, creeping over foul ooze—a muddy, beer-coloured river, asteam in the evil heat, with noisome things alive in its grey-green slime, with twisted roots hemming it, all crawling with hideous crabs. Yet both are waters."

"So—clear water and muddy," said Roland. "With Violet, it was one thought, one idea, one standpoint, and that as a means to gain and spend money. The beauty of her face and body, such as they were, were given to her to traffic for jewels and furs and laces. After a stormy rage, she only knew one means of conciliation—to offer, with palpably forced caresses, the thing she misnamed—love. But here, with Margaret, each day sounds a fresh depth in the clear deeps to the golden sands. Little, kind things she's thought of, slip out when she talks. Her ideas of life. And yet she would love, and think it no shame."

"Yes, if she could forget," said Hesling to himself. "If something did not trouble her!"

Next day under an awning, steaming through gentle heat, with the salt freshness of the sea about him, Roland spoke. Kindly people kept away from their corner, leaving the "young fools alone."

"Margaret"—his voice shook, she was so much to him—"Margaret, you must know—how I care."

Honest eyes, dark with sadness, meeting his. "Yes, I know, Roland. And I have not been strong enough to keep away from you."

"Then you care too," he said. Boy enough still to feel he walked in a fairy tale, since this woman cared for him.

"I do," she said, still in the same quiet voice.

"And, Margaret, you know of my marriage. A poor fool who was openly caught. You know I am not free. But—she—my wife, went away with someone. I dreaded the case being brought up then, now it would take no time. And then—in six months, Margaret—you and I."

His hand slipped on to hers, and found it cold as death.

Then her voice came in a gust of sadness. "Never, Roland," she said, drawing the cold hand away, as if she feared herself.

The big ship nosed through the glitter of waters, treading down the sea in her might, and came the pain which youth can feel—as is no other pain on earth. For it is rebellious and strong, and with no resignation in its sear and sting. Age knows, drearily, that the hot, blinding wave will pass, to leave us stranded on its flat sands of endurance. Youth fights, and strikes out, and cries, each choking breath an agony.

"Never, Margaret! You do not mean it." Roland stood up, his clear-cut face pale under the tan. "Margaret, have you thought? Because of a boy's folly, a boy, mark you, who was not much to blame, since an old man's madness had made him a mere pigeon among the hawks of life. Because of this, is he never to be happy? Margaret, is it fair?"

She drooped her head, but her voice was steady. "Roland, the law would free you, but between every moment of our happiness would lie the shadow of the other woman. I know I am a fool—old-fashioned—marriage to me is something sacred. It is for all time. We vow before God, remember. And — you were married in church—"

"Yes — she — Violet — wished it. By special license—"

"Then, to me nothing has power to break a promise made there—"

"Violet broke hers," said Roland, grimly, bitterly. "Into several pieces too." He was growing angry now.

"Yes. Yet—I cannot do it."

"You'd set the shadow of a girl from the streets—a woman who said frankly that she left me because she

did not find my income sufficient—who mocked at me from the first. You'd set her against my love—and yours for me—if you feel any," he rasped out.

"God knows I do," she whispered miserably.

"Margaret—then—" He launched argument, entreaty, anger, until he was weary, and never moved her resolution.

There were tears in her eyes; her face was drawn and pale. Yet always the same answer.

"I cannot—I cannot recognize divorce—"

He grew bitter at the last, seeing happiness slip from him.

"The lines you good women draw," he flashed out, "so tight, a man's soul may slip down to hell along them. If—I were to fall back in my despair into the slough of the folly which ruined me, who would be to blame, Margaret?"

"You," she said, flinging up her head—"you are too strong, Roland, for that. A man must be true to himself if he is worth loving."

"Oh, fine words," he said wearily. "Well, as you will, Margaret."

They were alone; he took her hands in his, drew her suddenly nearer and kissed her on her pretty mouth.

"By this kiss I'll be true to myself and you," he said, his voice shaking from the contact of her supple rounded body. The touch of his lips on hers, the smooth satin of her skin drove him mad.

It was joy—joy drowned with dark waters of sorrow, to feel her tremble in response, to feel her lips answer his, since there was none of the prudery of a small nature in her.

"Margaret, I shall wait." He let her cold hands go. "But you are free—"

"Free—to wait for you," she answered steadily. "There has never been anyone else. Roland, since I saw you in the tea-garden, there never will be anyone else."

So losing themselves in foolish dreams of what might be if Roland was free, bitterness dropping away as they whispered of what they would do if they were together. A great love is not all passion, there is too much companionship in it. The world was so wide, with so much to see. Their home would be so sweet to come back to.

Lady Grace, humming a tune, came sauntering along, Paul Hesling with her.

"I think—I hope, it's settled by now," she said, briskly. "Oh! the amount of things which I forget nowadays, and rush back to find, and come back without. Lovers are trying, Mr Hesling."

"They do not look very happy," he said, stopping suddenly.

Lady Grace caught at his arm. "Margaret has refused to countenance the divorce," she said tragically. "Oh, Mr Hesling, goodness is extremely trying."

"And in this case—dangerous," he answered. "Yet I never thought that Miss Knox would allow it. She would hate to be pointed out as the wife of a divorced husband. If one of her daughters were to marry a Catholic, he would scarcely think his wife legitimate."

"There are all kinds of pictures of queer old saints at Drym Castle," said Lady Grace, wrathfully. "Most tiresome people to be descended from."

"My dear lady!" said Hesling, seeking to clear the reputation of these dead cardinals and bishops.

"Oh, well, they were brothers or uncles or something," she answered irritably. "Or didn't they marry in those days—I know there were queer stories about them—

they're written down in old papers in the libraries. I've no patience with Margaret, anyhow."

No patience; yet going across, her hand fell on her daughter's arm with a gesture so loving that the girl's eyes filled with tears.

"I—have been asking Margaret to marry me," Roland said, his voice strained. "And she will not take so black a sheep."

"It is the divorce," said Lady Grace, her tone troubled. "I'm dreadfully distressed. And then, all those annoying Catholic ancestors—bishops and monks and things, long ago before Sir Rupert changed his religion. I believe he only did it to save being shot too, and he needn't have bothered, because he died a year afterwards, but his daughter married a young Cromwell —a Roundhead, I mean—and his son, another, and they went on being Protestants always."

"Quite so," said Paul, rubbing his forehead. When Lady Grace discoursed on the subject of her husband's ancestors, it took swift mental feet to follow her.

"I will say good-night. I am tired. I shall not come to dinner." Margaret Knox went slowly away, outlined against a glow of evening light. Slender, and yet never thin; a woman born for love, who was renouncing it probably for ever.

The ship thrummed through the sparkling sea. The appetizers so dear to civilization — cocktails— and Vermeutes and sherry and bitters, were being brought round on trays.

Careless men and women looked up at Roland without a thought of the tragedy so close to them.

"Roland!" Paul let his whole heart ring in the one short word.

"All right, Paul. All right. I know you care—I

know. After all, perhaps she's right. I should only be legally free."

"There is something too saint-like about Margaret," said Hesling; "she is fine and pale as a halo. I am half afraid of her sometimes. Then, Roland, there is always the hope of release."

"Of death," said Roland, hopelessly. "Violet was quite young. It's hard, Paul, to think I'll never have a real wife, and sons and daughters of my own. The simple, ordinary things which each man wraps about with mystery and joy as if no one else had ever possessed them. It must be you and I for all time, old man. Until you fall in love—"

"I think the only woman I should ever care to marry is Lady Grace," said Paul, thoughtfully, "and she is four years older than I am. There would be the constant joyous excitement of trying to follow those long sentences of hers, and find out what she meant. She knows herself all right. I shan't fall in love, Roland. Not now. It was buried for me at twenty-seven."

"You lost someone?"

"My poverty lost someone. One cannot ask a white girl to sweat her youth out in West Africa. She begged me to, poor child, and cried her eyes out, and married someone else, I fancy, for she gave up writing. Poor Rosie—she was rather like a rose, too—so soft and pink."

On into cooler days; into waters which grew grey—to winds which lashed and stung. Spring sailed over northern climes, with whip of rain, and roar of wind, and fleeting glimpses of sun. There were days of dull suffering to Margaret and Roland. The dread of parting before them. Parting with no hope of meeting

again. They were better apart. Sometimes they thought they would be glad when they landed and there was not the meeting to keep sorrows alive; then each throb of the screw brought sick fear of the day when it would slow and stop. It was inevitable; no ache of human sorrow could check the steady driving through the sea, the sighting of white cliffs and the landing on a cheerless quay.

"Hold fast there!" Slow movements of warping in would pass—the great ropes out—the gangways down. Then—hands touching, white faces bent down. "Good-bye." One prays for delay; one snatches at even a minute's respite; with the nose of the great engine Progress, clearing the puny mortal from the Line. "Get on—it is the law of life. Meetings or partings. Ye cannot stand and tarry. Ye must march on. March on—to the end, when you will lie by the line, and will not see my smoke. In infant's robes, in bridal gowns, in trappings of woe; with laughter on your lips, with despair at your heart, horror in your eyes, time passes—you must go."

Youth knows the meaning of time. In age we lose the power to weigh it. Youth knows what a minute may mean, what it can cram into a blissful half-hour. How a long day can drag—a week pass as a century, when there is happiness in front. Youth lives even in the future. Its snatched bliss reels from its hands, but there is more to come. It clings to the revolving world; while age, dim-eyed and hopeless, stands aside and lets it roll by.

It came—too soon. A quay bathed in chill spring sunlight; light clouds floating in an April sky. The slow passing among the mass of shipping, then the journey up the Solent, then—they must part.

Two atoms of humanity among the great bustling crowd, yet to each heart its own bitterness.

"We are going straight up to Town." There was entreaty in Lady Grace's voice. She would not ask openly unless it was necessary, but Roland knew. Her eyes said, "Do not have a parting at Waterloo. Do not hurt Margaret there in public."

"We shall come later," he said quietly. "There are other trains."

"It's really better, Roland. And if anything happens to that dreadful, impossible wife of yours, and oh, lots of other people's—those people do die at times—don't they. It's all the champagne, I fancy, and too much to eat and late hours. If she should be lucky enough— Well, not quite that—but—if she does, wire to me, Roland. Margaret is very unhappy. I meant to get you asked to the Martins for Ascot week. But now, of course— Drym Castle will always find me. Margaret hates it, so I never go there now. But letters, you know. And of course it's dreadful, but with the child's ideas, and what is the use of being happy if you really aren't."

"It's as good as Hampton Court," said Hesling to himself. "The woman weaves a fair Rosamond's bower every time she speaks."

A moment in the crowded saloon, when everyone was snatching a last meal.

"Good-bye, Margaret."

"Good-bye, Roland. Oh, Roland, I wish—that I could have—"

"But—you won't." He turned and went away.

"Drink this, Miss Knox, before you go on shore. Don't let the travelling scandal-mongers say you are going broken-hearted." Hesling had opened a tiny bottle of champagne.

"Thank you," she said gently.

"There is—never any chance, I suppose," he asked suddenly.

"None," she answered wearily. "I am afraid, apart from anything else, that we are small-minded, Mr Hesling. We Knoxes dread a breath of scandal. My mother does, you know. She was nearly broken-hearted once when there was something about my eldest brother." Her face contracted as she spoke. The curious look of turning her mind's eye in, as it were, to look on some dark memory, came over it.

"There is something," said Hesling to himself.

Great London smiled under a golden twilight when they steamed in that evening.

They stayed at the Metropole—Roland would not go near the Ritz again—and went out to the Empire.

It was difficult to get a seat. A new dancer was delighting London. A slim thing, posturing behind a cloud of pale-blue gauze, which fell over slender limbs and pale young face as she floated across the stage. A summer's night, she called the dance. Behind her there was a setting of deep, starlit blue, a mist of space and nothing more.

Beautiful, dreamy; and the girl was a dancer—a Pole—a thing full of soul and fire.

"We'll stand, then, for a little." They bent over the balustrade at the sides, watching the distant stage. A crowd of men and women strolled in the promenade.

The curtains came together to a thunder of applause. They parted again for morn. Rose flush of sun; the draperies all softly pink; the music humming joyously; the girl twirling lightly—with all the joy of an untired day in her lithe movements. Yet it was not so appealing as the mystical dance of night.

Roland looked idly at the throng of painted faces, of smartly dressed women. Then he caught Paul's arm; gripped it so that black marks stayed there for days. "Dear God! Look!" he said.

"What, Roland! Not—your wife—"

"My wife—here," he said.

Her fair beauty almost gone; her hair dyed chestnut; her face set in its mask of red and white. An audacious hat drooping over it.

She looked old, haggard; the jewels at her throat, the huge brooches she wore, were palpably false.

"Van Delt lets her come here," cried Roland.

"Van Delt, Roland! Those women do not abide." Paul quieted him. "Steady, old man. Van Delt was not a man to stick to anyone, was he?"

"I do not know. She had all the jewels too. She took them with her."

Violet turned; saw her husband. Her face darkened with bitter malice, with swift, unrestrained rage. "You!" she said hoarsely. "You! *Damn* you—Roland."

"Hush! Don't make a disturbance here." Hesling held his hand up.

"Sir Roland and Lady Mainwaring chucked out of the Empire," she said shrilly. "Yes—nice job, that. Shall I have it done."

"I—never dreamt of seeing you here," he said dully. Across the sear of pain, the new misery; across the lilting music, and the hot, throbbing air, came the thought, beating all others down. Margaret was right. What if with her, they had met this woman somewhere—at a race-meeting—at a restaurant—and she had made this scene.

"You've brought me here," she raged at him.

"You! If you'd divorced me, Van Delt would have married me then. Sir Roland Mainwaring's divorced wife would have appealed to him. He swore he would. But you went off—left me—in your grandeur. And so—a year saw the end of that—so I say what I said, Roland Mainwaring. I just get along with dancing sometimes. The jewels are gone. I was robbed in the sales. And it was you—you!"

She stood raging at him, storming coarsely, and the amazing thing was she really blamed him and not herself. Her own heartless flight did not weigh with her at all. It was not gentlemanly; he had not played the "gime"; he was a cur, sneak and everything she had always thought him to be.

"Roland, you must take your name from this creature. You owe it to yourself." Paul spoke in German.

The shrill abuse was turned on him. "You, Mr Sour Face," she said. "Oh, I'll watch you both. I will now, and bring *my* divorce. I'll find out things—just to let people see."

"What are you going to do now?" Roland asked her. He was not angry, only very tired.

She paused at the gentle voice, hesitated a little. "Going off to South America, if you want to know," she said sullenly. "A fellow's offered to take me out to keep house out there for him. He's written for me."

It hurt Roland to see she had on some of the smaller jewels which he had given her. An enamelled violet, a little watch; other things.

"Then, for God's sake—go." Roland had pulled out his cheque-book. He wrote feverishly and passed the slip to Violet. "Take that; try to get him to marry you, and if he will—I'll put in my papers for a divorce, and give you a good dowry."

She sat fingering the slip. It was an open bearer cheque, so that there should be no difficulty. She coughed suddenly, a fit which racked and shook her.

"Right oh!" Not a word of thanks, of gratitude, or good feeling. "I'll let you know, my dear husband. You'll see my sailing duly chronicled in the list of the *Evening Star*. Look out for it. Ta-ta, then," she said, and strolled off, coughing as she went.

Sir Roland's head was bent as the head of a child who has committed some sin, and is deadly ashamed. It was as if a blight had fallen on him.

"Margaret was right," he said at last. "Right—while that is alive."

"And can call herself your wife, Roland. Divorce her now—immediately—before she leaves London. It's for her sake also."

"Perhaps, Paul—"

Yet no papers were served. The *Evening Star* threshing her great bulk back again, carried two lady passengers. One booked as Violet Deering was Roland's wife.

"Roland, you should not lose sight of the woman; she may die."

Roland shook his head. It was Paul who went to an inquiry office and set the spies to work.

"Just watch the woman; they do not live long, these people; she may get ill." They told him of Violet's name on the ship.

They journeyed to Worcestershire then. Down to Lyme Regis. Old, gabled, splendid, standing in lawns which were smooth from the cuttings of years. The great hall was dim and cool; the suites of rooms almost too vast for the owner's income. For this reason they

had let the place to millionaires, who loved to sit among the suites of armour, to eat in the huge old banqueting hall; to stalk their house-parties down the long picture galleries with treasures wrought on canvas. Roland's for life only; the entail was strict.

Here, using the library and one small sitting-room, Roland fought his trouble out; fought it, until it almost mastered him. He took no comfort from the quiet of the country; from the wealth of blossom of lilac and laburnum on to the budding of the roses; from white to deepest crimson the old rose-garden was filled with their beauty.

A stupid, shy man, the country called him. As invitations were refused, the Graces and Rosies and Joans found they had purchased their new frocks all in vain.

The hired French *chef* at the Marstons cooked no dinner for Sir Roland. He refused the invitation. He fought through sleepless nights, through weary days, and the ache bit deeper.

"Paul"—he came down one morning with the tired eyes of one who has not slept—"Paul, I must get to see her. I must see her or I shall go crazy. Lord! It's a world set for happiness. Look at it; blue skies and wealth of flowers. We could be happy here without keeping all the place up."

He went wistfully to the deep window, looking out on a flagged terrace. Let his untouched breakfast be, and went by a side-door into the air.

"I sniff hope to-day," he said, through the window. "Why is it, Paul?"

"Perhaps because the jade is coming to you," said Paul, quietly. "The letters are late. Oh, here they are now."

The man brought them in, telling of a break-down on the line.

Roland opened his listlessly, then started, as he read one. It was from Grace Knox.

A scrawl just to show he wasn't forgotten. And Margaret was fairly well, but not very, and distressingly given to slumming with curates; they were so dreadfully infectious, and one had to go to them in cloaks and straw hats. "Oh, she means the slums," said Roland, relieved. And they were off to the Martins for Ascot; such a lovely place, and Mr Martin would have asked Roland, but if he came down to the Races he would see Margaret, and perhaps it would be good for them both to meet sometimes, though Margaret was quite well, she wasn't really; and she was his ever,—Grace Knox.

Roland threw the letter to Paul. "Read it," he said. "Shall we go to Ascot on Cup Day, Paul?" His voice shook.

But Paul was staring at a typewritten letter, with wide open eyes.

Go Cup Day! Perhaps it meant that Margaret would relent. Would, to save him, marry a divorced man, and go through life with a shadow on their happiness.

"We'll go there every day," roared Paul, beating at the rose-covered balustrade so that the petals fell in scented showers. "Wire to Lady Grace for an invitation; for, Roland, your wife's dead. There's only a cable as yet—here. But she's dead. You are free."

He thrust the papers into Roland's hands. A copy of cable from Durban. "Violet Mainwaring died here last night. In house 'The Stoep,' owner Mr Samuels. Died of fever. Particulars following."

Hope had come in the breeze, waved wings over the rose gardens. Roland was free. The chauffeur flew, still eating breakfast, to the door. The Panhard rushed to the humming wires in the town.

"Can you still get me invitation for Paul and self if possible. Say nothing to Margaret.—MAINWARING, Lyme Regis, Worcester."

Hours dragging then. At last the car flying up the avenue with the wire.

"Mrs Martin delighted, has room both being men; very annoying could not get through for an hour. Glad. —KNOX."

Roland put his hand on Paul's shoulder.

"Hope has come in among the roses," he said unsteadily.

CHAPTER VII

Motors humming along the smooth sandy Surrey roads; past wealth of broom and clinging honeysuckles, through groves of pine woods, and past the hundreds of houses—ornate brick for the most part, covered with the glaring contrast of pink roses—houses which are gradually linking the place with London. Royal Ascot was to have its royal right of sunshine, its warm wind blowing over the green course.

The sky had grown bluer in a lover's eyes; the world taken colour. The flowers were never so sweet, the hedges with their roses and honeysuckle bringing fresh whiffs of sweetness, when the road was smothered in a dun cloud of acrid, sandy dust, and being human, one cursed the man who dared to motor ahead.

Then, with his dreams, lover's misgivings. If Margaret should have changed her mind — found in the long weeks some one to love—a sick ache then to the tune of the throbbing car.

Roland drove carefully. Yelping, foolish dogs were safe from him, but with a clear road he liked the hum of increasing pace—the restrained power of the engine—almost a thing alive as it swept up hills, ate up the sandy miles.

Through the wide street of Ascot village, then to the right.

"It's here, I think." He stopped to ask. "Silver Beeches. Yes, that's it."

An imposing structure of brick, crudely unmellowed as yet; a shallow artificial lake lapping the lawn; the big beech trees which gave the house its name grouped in splendid, shady masses close to the house.

Shy as a boy, Roland stopped the car. Mrs Martin was by the beech tree, they were having tea out. A kaleidoscope of colours grouped by the big green trees, gowns of muslin and lace and linen, brilliant parasols; weirdly tinted flowers nodding on expensive garden hats. Tea-tables stood in the shade, laden with all the variety of food which is necessary to sustain man from luncheon finished at three to dinner coming at eight. A dozen varieties of sandwiches; caviare, cucumber, cream cheese. Piles of little iced cakes, hot biscuits, strong tea growing frankly bitter and tepid in the huge silver-gilt tea-pots. Another table, tucked away a little, was covered with iced drinks, and piles of rosy strawberries.

The Martins, as Lady Grace put it, were distressingly rich. "They made their money somehow," she explained to Paul. "Promoting salt, or was it salted mines—something mineral at any rate. And, of course, it really doesn't matter a bit, for she's quite nice and a dear, and cousin of heaps of people, and one doesn't mind him much because he's always away."

A tall, handsome woman detached herself from the group.

"Oh, Sir Roland, so glad. And Mr Hesling, so glad. So lucky. Delighted to see any friend of Grace's. You'll get to know everyone in a minute, won't you? Tea—do—you must be hot and dusty. Here's another car—Rose Everard, I'm sure. I hope she'll come straight out."

Hatless, sitting quietly in the shade, Roland saw

Margaret. She was a little thinner, her mouth drooped; she had the air of being alone amongst the gay, chatting crowd.

Her cheeks grew pink, slowly, as Roland came across to her. She started.

"Is it wise?" she said, giving him her hand.

"We shall see," he answered brightly. "Have you had tea?"

He brought some, sitting by her. It was stewed and cold.

"All this elaboration and they will not have a kettle," said Margaret, smiling faintly. "Why is tea, tea to some people, even if it is only lukewarm?"

Margaret's fair hair was puffed a little, making a frame for her delicately cut face.

"You are not glad to see me, then?" Roland asked. He rolled the delight of his news upon his tongue, as an epicure dallies with a plat he hates to finish; sitting close to her he took fire—dreamt of holding her pale beauty close, of her lips answering his own. When trouble was gone, the faint feeling of fear which he had for her must vanish, the saint would step from its niche and tremble to life in his arms.

"I am glad to see you, and you know it," she answered; "that is the trouble."

"It's a big party here." He looked at the beautifully dressed women, the coolly clad men. To-morrow, on a balmy summer's day, one must stew in black coat and top hat, the mad summer garb of a conservative nation.

"Too big!" Margaret answered. "Mother will come every year. She loves it. She will tell you who everyone is—with elaborations. There is the beauty of the year—in mauve—Ruby Dundaire."

A dark, glowing beauty, self-possessed as a woman of thirty. Young as she was, carefully powdered and gold-dust on her bronze hair. The mauve gown, her deep mauve hat, the huge bunch of pink carnations she wore made a scheme of carefully thought-out colour. Beautiful, knowing it too well, prepared to gain for that beauty as many thousands per annum, town and country houses, as she could. A husband would, of course, have to be thrown in to bring the balance down. Smiling, she was flashing glances at Lord Clifford, a man who had evaded matrimony for too long. The reason for the evasion—a faded, golden-haired woman looked on, with the bitterness which fleeting beauty knows, when it watches the perfection of youth—for the poor fool loved the man, and lived for him.

"There, that is Lady Moira Moore—the Irish beauty. A miniature Venus, is she not?" A tiny thing, dark also, a little rawly assertive as yet—but a sweet, merry child at heart, and one who might disappoint her mother sorely, if she fell in love with the wrong man. But powdered too, faintly rouged, covering up the healthy brown which she gained hunting. Little Lady Moira rode hard and straight.

"And here is mother," said Margaret.

"Oh, Sir Roland, I'm so glad you came. I must tell everyone to talk to you and tell you their names; I think they ought to be ticketed you know, here. I expect you don't know any of them. See that sandy-haired woman there—that's Lady Greedon, the woman Decies shot himself for, and she's smiling as if no one had ever fired off a pistol at their own face. Such a shock it must be. That little woman in green is Vera Greene, the most spiteful woman in London; she poses

as a saint, you know, and that makes it so much easier. See how she pulls her hair flat, and there are such heaps of things one can say walking home with a prayer-book and a rector to lunch, that one simply recoiled at otherwise. The two little Hilarys would be quarrelling at Queen's Gate still, if she hadn't started the story of the diamond bracelet. Poor things—such a pity! Some people quite enjoy quarrelling. And that's Sir Mark Deleraine, the West African man—or was it Egypt. Well, somewhere. He's delightful; they say he'll be Commander-in-Chief. And that's Dixon Bard, the composer. And Jimmy Shute, who could buy us all up. And, dear me, that's Margaret's curate."

A thin, austere, coarse-lipped man came across the lawn—too much consciousness of holiness written on his face, to have kept a great quantity in his heart.

"He's got a parish in the East End. He wants Margaret to have one too—that is his, you know," whispered Lady Grace. "And she's *so* foolish—she talks of a spiritual marriage, said it would be the only way to do it—the man probably wouldn't be a bit spiritual when she got to know him—that's why I wrote to you. Girls are such idiots," said Grace Knox, frankly.

"Ah!" Roland drew a long breath.

"We motored the man down; he goes back by train. He's a cousin of ours—I don't like him a bit. He will say Salmon mayonnaise is not a dish to fast on," said Lady Grace, thoughtfully. "I gave him fried herrings next time, and he dined on bread."

Some of the girls had grouped, laughing together as girls will. Margaret was near them, but they did not draw her in. They seemed a little afraid of her too. She smiled quietly at Moira Moore, as the tiny thing flung out some sharp, merry speech.

"Moira, what a little witch you are," she said. "Don't talk so loud, dear. People might hear."

The girls drew closer together. Margaret, in her clinging white gown, stood by herself.

The thin man in black joined her. Roland got up. "It is time for me to come in to this game," he said to himself, walking across.

"Sir Roland Mainwaring—my cousin, Mr Knox Harding."

Honest young eyes met the glance of cold, yellow grey. What strange warning leapt into birth in Roland's mind. This man would be his enemy, would do him an injury. The muteness of early dislike fell on them. Neither spoke. A spiritual marriage. Roland flushed, looking at the clergyman's lips, at his chin and red, protruding ears. The meek, austere look upon his face was one carefully stencilled in, and not born there.

"Mr Knox Harding works in the East End," said Margaret, "among the very poor."

Why do thoughts flash unbidden? How long would he work there with Margaret Knox as his wife, and Margaret Knox's fortune made his own?

"It must be interesting work," Roland spoke lamely.

"Interesting—indeed," the cold voice rasped emphatically, setting Roland's teeth on edge. "Giving a little light here, a little help there; sowing the seed and one may never see it grow. And now, I have a helper," said Knox Harding, proudly.

"It's rather unsafe there, isn't it?" said Roland, sharply. "Rather dreadful."

"Oh, no," Margaret smiled. "And there is so much to do—in those awful houses."

"It is very nearly time for me to leave. I see the car waiting." This was challenge. Knox Harding's eyes

met Margaret's. "There is time for one stroll by the lake, Margaret, before I go."

"Yes." Her face very pale, she turned, detaching herself as it were from Roland, and all his heart cried to him, "Do not let her go with him. She is going to be asked to make a promise."

"I must say good-bye first." A dark blot crossing the brilliant colours, Knox Harding looked for his hostess and Grace Knox came from under the tree.

"I am going to dress for dinner," she said. "It takes me an hour to arrange my complexion." This sheer assertive vanity, since her skin was smooth as a girl's.

Roland touched Paul's arm. "Go with them, Paul, she might be angry with me. I distrust that man. Go! He's trying to get her to marry him."

"Then—why didn't you write?" said Paul, half-irritably. Aloud, he shook Margaret's hand, glued himself to her side with the joy of friendship recovered.

"We shall just have time to stroll by the lake. Come, Margaret."

"I should love to see the lake, Miss Knox, so would Roland. Come along."

"It was like walking in a shower of knives," said Paul afterwards. "And about as cheery as the inside of a mausoleum."

But he walked, talking inanely of the ship, of their journey across, of Lyme Regis and its beauty.

"You should see it, Miss Knox. The rose gardens would swallow this whole place and the old fish pond, the bowling-green, and the clipped yews that Charles the First is supposed to have planted. It only wants one thing."

"And that?" she asked.

"A mistress," he said meaningly.

"Margaret—about—next week?" Knox Harding tried to draw the girl aside.

"Next week will be an aftermath, won't it?" said Paul, covertly eyeing his wrist watch. "What time is your train—6.50? You'll miss it to a certainty in another minute."

"Good-bye, then, until Saturday." An angry glare stabbed Paul's unheeding profile.

"Until Saturday," echoed Margaret, uneasily.

"Or I may run down some evening to see you."

The car hummed on its way.

"A shocking waste of petrol," said Paul, absently. "Miss Knox, put on your prettiest gown and forget the slums."

"No, since they help me to forget myself," she answered gently, and went in.

The big dining-room at the Silver Beeches was a scheme of red that night. Pots of ripe cherries in gilt bowls decked each little table, red flowers floated in the finger-bowls, the sweets were scarlet in red enamel dishes. It was a craze of their hostess's. To-morrow night it might be mauve, with plum trees and orchids, things to be thrown away after they had been tended for a year or more for one night's decoration.

"It's such a blessing she does not do it at breakfast," said Grace Knox, picking a cherry. "I should be quite afraid of cherry-red butter or purple eggs."

Hum of light laughter, gleam of bared, satiny shoulders, soft warring of lavender-water and faint clean scents—since Jikki and Tréfle and their kinds are now left to other spheres. Careless jest, and low-voiced confidence, the under-current of passion rippling the lake of Society. Here, Sir Mark Deleraine with his eyes fixed on young Lettice Helmsley. Counting on

this week, having schemed to gain her invitation; watching her flush and pale and look troubled, carried away by the great soldier's admiration. Here, Duncan James, a big mass of fleshy humanity, whispers to Lady Moira. No good, little Moira, for you to have this man for an admirer. When he marries it must be Miss Nathan or Miss Sadie Day; the portion of a poor Irish earl's daughter would not keep him for a year. But the man liked young girls—their frank merriment, their folly, their love of admiration. He was big, dark, heavy—cultivating an air of mystery.

"I'll just stop that. Her mother's a pretty fool," said Grace Knox, briskly. "Lady Clanvally thinks every man just a man and as delightfully kind-hearted as she is herself. I'll send that nice Tony boy round presently."

Under a rose-pink gown the fox gnawed at one heart. Evelyn Hillyard talked empty, foolish words; for a dark girl, all satin shoulders and exquisite youthful beauty, was at Hal Cliffording's table, her big, dark eyes rising with a flash, falling modestly. Her perfectly modelled arms stretched out that he might note them. Her scarf to be picked up and put on so that he might look at the rare beauty of her childish dimpled shoulders and neck.

Tragedy has a place at every merry-making—the unbidden guest who will not stay away.

Some of the girls had looked with interest at Sir Roland. "Mother said he had some money. Lyme Regis was a dream. But—" Shoulders shrugged. "My goodness, he's only come down for saint Margaret; let him alone."

Mothers, knowing the uncertainty of humanity, were wiser and had talked to Roland in the drawing-room.

The Ordeal of Silence

Dinner seemed interminable to Roland. It dragged from iced soup through fish and entrée, down to the interregnum of ices and cigarettes, and then on again, when he half hoped it finished. For Margaret was coldly civil, as if she would not be glad—through the blue haze of smoke her pale face stood out, exquisite to him, her slender neck and arms, her gown of cloudy blue, the long chain with the cross her only jewel.

"Come into the garden." The scent of white pinks was pungently sweet.

"I think that I will stay in," she answered.

"No—I—have something to tell you. Come, you owe me one half-hour," he whispered boyishly.

Out on the baked slippery grass, by the sandy beds where pinks, carnations and roses grow in the profusion only Surrey knows. A hedge of sweet-brier sent out its quaint, delicate scent. Sweet-peas raised ghostly fragile heads. The moon sailed, a globe of silver in a cloudless sky.

"We can sit here." She drew a chair forward, sitting in the full light of the moon.

"As you will. I'll see your face now—the shadows afterwards, Margaret."

"Oh, why—why—have you come?" she burst out, almost wildly. "I was learning to endure; I thought I saw my mission in life. And now—" Her voice rang with suffering.

"And now," he said. "Margaret—you were right not to take me when my wife was alive."

"Was—" she cried, with a throb at her heart.

"For now—she is dead. She died in South Africa. Margaret, I have been a poor thing down in my home, fretting each hour away. Will you come to it now? I

waited until the evening to tell you. Margaret, you haven't changed to me? "

"Until now! And I—nearly gave my promise," she whispered tremulously.

"Come to the beeches," he said gently. "Sweetheart, don't cry—don't cry, it's true—I'm free—free to come to you."

Under the shadow of the beeches he held her in his arms, kissed the sweet, pale face. Sorrow had fallen away. They whispered of the perfect future, of the life together which is always new to the sons and daughters of men.

Together—always—belonging to each other for all time until sour, celibate death ripped one companion away from its mate.

"Lyme Regis is too big for me," he said. "We must camp out in it, Margaret mine." And the sweetness in that "we."

"Oh, I cannot realize it," she said. "Roland, I loved you so dearly. I was trying to put it away. He told me love was sinful."

"How sinful? Since God made us for it? " said Roland, quietly. And yet, even with his arms about Margaret, he was a little afraid of her. He touched her gently, held the ardour of his kisses in check. She was so good, so pure. He hated the hours he had spent in his first liberty. They would go to Paris together, but Margaret's Paris must be one of pictures and drives and operas — the very froth of the gay underworld must not wash her feet.

From the drawing-room came a trill of exquisite notes. Lady Clanvally was singing "I saw from the Beach."

"And leaves us at eve on the bleak shore alone," rang the glorious voice.

"As we never shall be," said Roland. "Do not shiver, Madge. We'll have no omens."

Even if there had been any idea of secrecy, Roland's joy would have betrayed them.

He came to the house in a very arrogance of happiness. Man had wooed and won once more.

"Good gracious! Why not write a label with 'Engaged' upon it?" said a woman irritably. "Heavens! how men exalt our value when they first make up their minds to endow us with their names."

"They don't know you so well," cackled Sir Wilfred Lawson. "That's it, you see."

"Not at all, it's just their own pride, Sir Wilfred. Behold, since I, a man, have chosen this, it must be the best thing on earth. It's prehistoric, primeval. But a little delightful—in a way."

"Wasn't there—some queer story about dear Margaret?" Vera Greene's soft, cooing voice broke in. They had all paused at the end of a rubber of Bridge. —"About her first engagement or—something?"

"Never," said Lettice Helmsley, emphatically. "Lady Grace stamps on scandals as if they were black-beetles; she brought that girl up in a glass case and never allowed her out by herself in her first season. The saint, we all call her."

"Roland," said Lady Grace, who was too agitated to play Bridge, "you might have told me in the wire —you might have—"

Roland laughed boyishly.

"To think how that slum cousin has been on my mind for two un-needed days. And the idea of Margaret in a brown house with a wall and a lot of dark-

brown creepers round it—and bought sponge-cakes on a brass tray with a reformed burglar for a butler."

"Madge, would you have really married him?" Roland asked.

"Not as—" Margaret blushed hotly. "But as his helper, Roland, to work down there and so forget—forget you," she said, her pale face growing sad.

Ascot to two people was a race-meeting run in Paradise. As Roland had no ticket for the enclosure, Margaret sat in the paddock with him, and horses won and lost unheeded.

"'Black Rupert lost by a nose,' I said to Margaret, and she said, 'Oh, did he?' quite absently," Lady Grace grumbled good-humouredly. "People in love are too annoying, Mr Hesling. They really ought to have a world to themselves."

"They have, I fancy," he said gravely.

Humanity breathes contagion. Pretty Lettice Helmsley grew suddenly weary of hot wooing, of the glare and rustle of Ascot lawns, of iced cup and asparagus, of frocks which she could not afford to pay for.

She came one night to Margaret, looking at her wistfully.

"Miss Knox, you are so happy, you two. It makes one sad. And when you marry—"

"One can go on being happy, cannot one, Mrs Helmsley?"

Lettice shook her head. "Men neglect one then. Leave one to dine alone, to lunch alone—grumble at bills and bothers."

"Neglect one—or perhaps have not so much time." Margaret looked steadily at the flushed face. "Some husbands have to work to earn money, and workers cannot holiday-make."

Hot flushes paling, wet eyes looking into the June sunshine. Tim, toiling in the stuffy office, coming home weary, often worn out. Tim alone up there. He had asked her to lunch, in dreadful places citywards, so as to spare his time. And—she—the glamour of excitement had been about her. Sapphire brooches, parties, all made possible by her new friend—Friend—"

"Oh! ' said Lettice, with a quick, gulping breath, and ran to the telephone. A telegram coming later called her away. Ascot Thursday was just over and tired crowds coming homewards, when a sobbing girl slipped to a man's arms.

"Tim, I've been a pig. Oh, Tim, I never will again —I'll lunch with you to-morrow, Tim, on chops and onions—I will indeed. I thought you didn't want me."

Tim, being wise, said nothing, but understood.

"They looked so happy, those two, they made me think of our engagement," said Lettice, later.

Contagion again. On Wednesday night Cliffording left a table decked in soft pink and strolled across to Mrs Hillyard. Ascot had made her thin, there were tired lines on her face, her eyes looked worn.

"Eve, I weary of Bridge. Come to the gardens."

Is woman ever too old to thrill at the one voice on earth to her? They went into the dewy-scented night.

"I—am so tired of Ruby," he said quizzically.

"Hal, you are always with her—that girl."

"It's a perpetual exhibition of perfection," he said, sighing, "of behold my arms—touch the satin of them —see my profile—can you match me in all London town? When I was waylaid over eggs and bacon, Evie, to be shown the beauty of simplicity in white muslin, I grew tired. You never come to breakfast."

"I am afraid of the morning light," said Evelyn, truthfully.

"And I dislike it. I had to let my tea get cold to wait on Ruby. Evie, it was a foolish straying. I've been watching those two engaged idiots—and—there isn't anyone except you—in the world."

Who could call Mrs Hillyard faded as she came glowing to the Races next day? No bitterness now in looking at fresh, sweet youth, since it would not rob her of the one man's love.

Sir Mark talked with Lila Storme, a fair woman, handsome, a being weighed entirely in its own balance; short weight, until with needed payment, the scales tipped. Slim, massaged, artificial, having forgotten the little heart she ever had. A pirate, sailing with the black flag marked, sailing among pleasure yachts as one of their fleet.

"A comfortable house," she said coolly, as hurt Sir Mark sat with her after tea. "And sensible people. But Ascot—Ascot is hopeless, Sir Mark. It costs me more hundreds than I can pay."

"Make up a party for Goodwood," he said. "Let me be one."

Impossible. Mrs Storme must economize—otherwise she would go—Goodwood would see her with her children—at Margate or Broadstairs—or in a cottage in Surrey. Vaguely put, since Mrs Storme knew, none of them would find her with them there.

A dark, puny boy, a fair-haired girl, would go to some poor place and live on frozen meat and rice puddings. New frocks would be a necessity for Goodwood.

The Pirate ran her flag up now, frankly—showed the yawning muzzles of the guns.

Since man, tuned to folly, must play on it, Sir Mark laughed. The Goodwood gowns must be his affair. For the rest, since it was a comfortable house, the affair was arranged.

Walking softly, speaking gently, little Vera Greene gathered up the scandal of the week. It was always useful, if only to get her asked out. When fools were a little reckless they did not notice a softly opened door, light eyes which peered into the gloom. It could pay, too, this information. Hints dropped, could bring invitations, presents, divers little ameliorations to the hard lot of a scandal-monger's life.

When the big car hummed Londonwards on Saturday morning, the chauffeur, with the air of an injured man, travelled by train, and Margaret sat by the side of a man who steered through a mist of his golden dreams. Flash of yellow broom, drench of sweet-briers' scent, curtain of blue skies all matching the melody, all merging to a perfect whole.

The car drew up at a house in Lancaster Gate, and Lady Grace touched her daughter's arm, as one who remembers something—suddenly.

"Have you told Ralph?" she asked. "Because he's here. I see that stick he carries."

"Told Ralph!" Margaret's face changed. "I—never thought of writing to him, mother."

"So much for the mission of a lifetime," said her mother softly.

"Ralph will be glad," said Margaret, proudly. "He will be glad of my happiness. It was only as a fellow-worker that he wanted me."

She left her mother in the midst of a long and involved sentence and went up the blue carpeted stairway. The drowsy airlessness of London made the country a

regret. They turned into the drawing-room. Typically one of London—with its fine chintzes, its white paint imitation Sheraton. The Knoxes took it furnished for the season.

"Ah! You have come, Margaret." Tall, austere, his greeting one of appropriation. Knox Harding held out his hands. His face changed suddenly, seeing Roland.

"Margaret, is it wise?" The whisper was audible, clearly meant to be so. "Margaret, my dear, are you strong enough to wrestle with fleshly inclinations? Or is a song of triumph on their graves, my dear?"

Margaret flushed softly, took the cold, strong hands trustfully.

"Roland's wife is dead," she said gently. "We have come to tell you, Ralph."

The mask slipped. The man turned away, but Roland watched him. A demon of anger leapt into his eyes, thwarted passion, furious disappointment drained the colour from his face. He was looking blue, his features working as he fought for composure. Loving another, Margaret's life would have been one of strange misery once she had stood before the altar with this man.

He had exalted her to sacrifice—tempted her with the hope of perpetual working in darkest England—and meant what he had said. But deeper still, below the saintly austerity which he had cultivated, was the power to love strongly, almost brutally, and all this secrecy of love seethed for fair, pale Margaret.

A struggle—a moment's silence—the mask was up. "It is indeed good news." His voice rang with a jarring grate. "And you, Sir Roland, I trust you will be worthy of such a wife."

"I trust so." Roland spoke dully, saw the claws below the glove, heard the bitter meaning in the voice.

"Take care of the cousin; he'll do or say something if he can," said Paul to Roland. "Look out for him, Roland. He's boiling with thwarted rage and too little amusement. Poor devil! I believe he slaves."

"I thought he would have been so much more pleased," said Margaret, thoughtfully.

Luncheon in the red-and-white dining-room, with the sunshine filtering through the stereotyped flowers, was not merry. Blight had fallen thus early on perfect happiness. Cutlets, asparagus, aspic, chocolate ice and caviare failed to soothe. Since it was some saint's day Mr Harding could only eat asparagus, and he must fast while others ate.

Why choose on this day the ways of the sinner as subject for light conversation? The folly of man who fell—who rooted among the husks? His fault—his—none other. And, branded for all time, never the same again—Evil's mark upon him, stamped on his once white soul.

"Scant mercy in your creed," said Hesling, coolly.

"No mercy to those who erred through unchecked desire. Then blaming others. Lightly rising from the dark flood—coming coolly to sunlit sands of virtue—taking some pure girl's hand—seeing no sin in marrying her."

Roland was getting pale; there was storm light in his eyes—storm light and mask of fear. Had he not plunged and risen? Was this aimed at him?

"Since the dip is a common one, would you have no man rise, reverend sir?" asked Hesling, with chill anger in his voice.

Oh, he would let him rise, but wait alone. Leave purity to purity—clean soul to clean soul. Behind the

peal of marriage bells, behind the flower-strewn church, the glamour of his wedding, would stand memory. Come stealthy-footed up the aisle, stand mouthing at the altar. Ring tocsin through the joy bells.

"Busy man," said Paul, taking a caviare biscuit

"Memory," Knox Harding ranted on, "until the irk and jar made the man callous. And until his wife learnt what he was—ceased to love him and saw him sink back, careless now of what he did."

"The man gets drunk with the sound of his own voice," muttered Paul, irritably.

Margaret was looking ill at ease—puzzled. She knew the rank of life Roland's late wife had been taken from—there was the sting, because she herself was not the first. Perhaps he had loved the other woman, whispered hot vows to her, used the same dear love words.

Ralph Knox Harding had been painting a picture with the brush of his words. He had meant to. Now, stopping suddenly, he saw it was before his cousin's eyes.

"I do think, Ralph, that you ought not to preach sermons at luncheon," broke in Lady Grace, suddenly—she had only listened to half. "They're quite out of place, you know, like roast beef and plum puddings. And about mixed bathing and all that too."

Here the tension snapped, cut by a sudden peal of laughter. Margaret's faintly hysterical. Paul's deep, unfeignedly merry, this mixed with heated explanation from Mr Knox Harding.

"I heard about sands and waves and men and women," said Grace Knox, sipping hot water resignedly. "And it's just the silly thing you all delight in. Wasn't it about mixed bathing, Mr Hesling?"

"Oh, without doubt," said Paul, gravely, "though in a Stygian sea, milady."

"He meant it," shot out Roland, as he drew Paul away. "Meant it for me."

"Showing the intense humanity below the nettle shirt," said Paul, dryly. "Don't shave taxis in your agitation, Roland, and take care of that man. He'll do you a mischief if he can and mean it all well."

Yet meeting Ralph Knox Harding next day, and meeting him with an ill grace, Roland's anger was disarmed.

The man was all saint then, full of fiery and yet gentle zeal, dropping cant and talking straight, clever sense, apologizing frankly for his outburst of the day before.

"I had a case in view," he said. "A reckless old fellow who married a mere child. You must forgive me, Sir Roland—I should have preached on happiness to you two."

Wedding bells must ring soon; the news had been confirmed and verified. Violet was dead—there was no mistake.

Sheen of silk and shimmer of satin, film of lace, web of gauze, for the bride to choose from. Dressmakers working hurriedly—white, thin hands weaving in patterns of moonlight beads; twisting ribbons into roses. London was searched for presents by Roland. No huge, flashing jewels, dashing their value arrogantly in the onlooker's face, but rare and curious treasures. A necklace of old enamel, set about with tiny brilliants. A pendant wrought by fairy hands into a lace-work of gems. A string of Venetian beads, amber and scarlet and blue and cream, with moonlight and sunlight caught in their shimmering depths. And for her

wedding-day, a crown of marguerites, the Mainwaring milk-white pearls, picked out with diamonds, set round soft-hued topazes, and with a setting of emerald foliage seen here and there.

"Sweetheart, we'll go to Lyme Regis for our honeymoon," he begged. "Let our first happy days be there—at home."

"Camping out," he said later, laughing; "we do not open half the rooms. Wise men will have built a palace, Madge, for fools to love in."

"Is it so huge?" she asked.

"It would take twenty servants to dust it," he said ruefully. "There is an army of Dresden, of Sèvres, of Chelsea cramped in old cabinets, and their insurance represents an income."

So before Goodwood rings its knell on the mad merry-making of a great nation, their yearly penance in sweltering streets when all their homes are greenly sweet, St Margaret's was decked for a wedding. All in white marguerites, branching softly, covering rails and pulpit.

What difference in this wedding to his first! Roland remembered the bare church; the best man, no friend of his, but a bright-faced actor found by Violet. The girl in brilliant blue and monster hat coming in with her friend. And this—he stood looking over a sea of flowers, across a sea of faces watching for a figure all in white.

Turning away because one face behind him looked at him gloomily, cold menace in its eyes.

His widowhood was not wiped out from him. Only the night before, one prick among many had been dealt. Some question arose of formality of time. Knox Harding was asked.

"Oh, Sir Roland knows." The answer with cold meaning hidden behind a gentle smile. "He should know, he has been married before."

"Not first." Margaret never missed the point and its meaning. The shadow of the past was there, and Knox Harding knew how to keep it black.

"I fear I hardly remember." Roland, head up, his eyes alert and angry.

"No? How exquisite your presents are, Sir Roland." They were in the library, which glittered with silver and china and jewels. "Your own family diamonds are indeed magnificent. Reset, of course." A pause here. Intended to show that they must be to rest on Margaret's neck.

"They have not been out of the bank for nearly thirty years," said Roland. "So, of course, I had some alterations made."

He remembered it all now as he stood waiting, tall and dark and strong, Hesling beside him, standing bathed in the tinted sunlight filtering through the splendour of stained glass.

From soft chords to sudden swelling triumph. Once again a bride was coming, veiled, virginal, to give herself to her mate.

So fair and pale in her shimmering white, a cloud of gauze over her face, its folds held by the crown of white diamond-frosted jewel flowers.

One look, through the dimming folds, of love and trust, then to the altar-rails to vow with hearts as well as lips—

"Who giveth this woman?"

"I do," said Lady Grace, restraining speech with difficulty. "I do," she whispered audibly to the best man, "and I hate losing her, but I'm simply

delighted, and even Vera Greene can't find a flaw in this."

"Hssh," said Paul, gravely, hearing a bridesmaid titter softly.

The last words spoken, and Roland wishing childishly that his wife's cousin had not spoken them.

A crowd outside the church, waiting in the sunshine; the bride's veil was back now, her cheeks kissed to rosy pink by loving friends.

Out of the press a face sprang, catching Roland's eyes, making him pause.

A painted face, framed by a vast umbrella hat of straw, veiled in weird mesh of black. A shrill voice cut across the hum.

"Lord love us! See, it's Sir Roland. I never knew old Vi was sodded." Vulgar, ringing, it was too easy to hear. Roland flushed crimson, felt Margaret's hand leave his arm for a second.

"Who?" she asked quietly.

"A friend of Violet's—a sister actress," he answered unhappily.

A sister actress. He could see his wife's eyes dwelling on the painted face, the gaudy summer gown.

"Do run along, Margaret darling." Lady Grace had not heard, and wondered at the delay.

"How dreadful and how awkward!" Knox Harding's cold face flashed into sudden tensity. "This for my Margaret on her wedding morn—this echo of what has been, in her bridal ears."

"She has occasionally heard it before," remarked Paul Hesling, testily.

What ill luck that this man had been near.

"Margaret, I am so sorry." Roland touched his wife's hand almost timidly.

"My poor Roland! You—and a woman of that stamp!" she answered gently.

Taking it nobly from the first. Making his heart leap in quick response. And yet—she felt it—it hurt and stung. He had made the same vows before—put a ring on another woman's finger.

Across the golden sunshine, the heavy day came muttering of thunder. And across Roland's happiness the dim feeling of fear. He was not worthy of this wife of his. His own past soiled the whiteness of her garments' hem. She was so good, so sweet—she would not understand men's folly and men's ways.

Vera Greene had a bonbon worth crunching to roll beneath her tongue at Goodwood. She had been near and heard.

Lady Grace was crimson now with distress. "It was a scandal—an outrage on us," she wailed. "And I, who hate and dread a scandal."

But when the good-byes were said, when showers of rice and confetti littered the crimson drugget and staid men-servants tried not to giggle at the grains which trickled down their necks—when Margaret, all in white, came shyly to the door, Roland forgot it all. She was his to hold and to adore. Let the past be. It was to him to make the future perfect.

The motor glided away to Euston. The crowd, remembering engagements, hurried back to the house to say good-bye. One figure in black stood dark upon the crimson carpet looking up the sunlit street.

"Crawsed in lov, 'e is," said James to Thomas, lapsing to blissful mother speech. "Nice old weddin' if 'e were the blighted groom, hey?"

James and Thomas looked down on shining gold in

their hands and muttered, but Ralph Knox Harding still stood alone, looking and thinking.

"He took her from me—a man who has lived as he has," he said, half aloud. "And I—who would have given my life for her."

"He's a-cussin now," said James, with relish. "*Yes*, milady— The Countess of Dullmenter's carriage there —Lord Ivalcon's carriage—"

Society, leaving, swept Ralph Knox Harding from his watch. He went slowly into the house.

"Lord! how happy those two will be," said Paul Hesling, as he met him on the stairs.

"Has Sir Roland the right to be happy?" came sternly.

"Yes, since his happiness means his wife's," shot back Paul. "Oh, my dear Knox Harding, don't let religion make you intolerant."

"I trust it does not, Mr Hesling," came the polite answer.

"But, I'm afraid of the fellow," muttered Paul, watching the dark figure as it left him. "I'm afraid of him," he repeated, rushing over to see Roland off. They were too early for their train.

CHAPTER VIII

AUTUMN laid brown fingers on Lyme Regis, flung leaves to earth, wearied gardeners of questing for these brown whirling memories of summer.

Gossamer threads stretched silver-wet across the grass; crisp of frost bit the air.

"It is so lovely, even now." Margaret Mainwaring came out on to the old flagged terrace; winter sunshine, winter light could pick no flaw in her pale skin; touched her hair to deeper golden.

From the first she had taken Lyme Regis to her heart. Loved every stone of it; was never tired of glorious gardens, of the velvet smooth bowling-greens; of my lady's pleasaunce, all trim with quaintly-shaped beds, hemmed by thick box. Here grew white pinks and gillyflowers and rosemary and lavender, daphne, striped roses, hanging out the colours of York and Lancaster. Tall lilies, little Queen Anne daffydilleys. One man saw to the place, keeping it full of strangely-named old flowers.

"To have kept you from it, Roland." Margaret turned to put her hand in Roland's. "Not to have let you live here—it was cruel of your uncle."

"We never could afford to," he said, holding her white fingers. "Twenty thousand a year is a clerk's pittance in this palace of mine. But now you love it, Margaret, we must be content with shut up rooms, with empty stables, with half the gardens in grass."

" I should hate ever to leave it. From the hour we came here it was my home," she answered softly. " Old places are alive with memory too, Roland. How many stories must cling to this. Was there—ever—disgrace —here. Evil stories—scandal? "

How white she grew, suddenly. He dropped her hand, looked at her with eyes which grew thoughtful.

" Where there's humanity, there's scandal," he said quietly. " But we have been proud of an untarnished record, Margaret. There were wild tales long ago. A drunken knight who killed his brother. They say you can hear the cries now once a year. A lady who disappeared—was never seen again, and with her an Italian tutor. Poor Lady Margaret! Years afterwards, pulling down an old cellar, two skeletons were found, and carved on a piece of wood the words—' To keep ye Scutcheon clean.' Sir Roland, the husband, shut himself up here after the disappearance, living in a darkened room—drinking—drinking, until he died."

Margaret shivered. " Margaret and Roland," she said. " Is it an omen, Roland? "

" Sweetheart, you fly in a clear heaven of your own," he said. " Far above scandal's smoke."

" I—yes." She grew pale again.

Paul Hesling looking out saw her face change, and shook his head.

" What memory troubles milady? " he said to himself.

Paul held his post. He was wanted in the great place. But he effaced himself cleverly now, leaving the married lovers alone.

Thin old Basling, a shade of the greyness gone from his face, was his friend from the first. Together they tried to farm the home fields, to add to Roland's in-

come in some small way. His place in Scotland was unlet. The village at Lyme Regis looked to their landlord for new houses—badly wanted, since the old thatched places were fever traps. Roland found money melt in this great place of his.

He was happy; told himself so. Worshipped his fair sweet wife as few men love. Yet, from the first, constraint had stepped between them. The man who had been foolish in his youth could never forget it, thought himself unworthy.

He would bite off a careless story before her, check laughter at some foolish joke. Frown strangely at Paul, if he discussed some case of the day.

"Not before Margaret, Paul. She does not like to hear of these things."

Without complete confidence there cannot be perfect happiness. And since it is ordained that ordinary mankind will always speak of those passions which sway the world, will joke about them and discuss them; so from the first Margaret was star, set far above, not sun to keep warm by.

She would slip off to early service, leaving Roland sleeping, to wake and miss her with a sense of loss.

They had gone to Paris in September. Margaret had suggested a trip there. How decorous at Paris now! Driving and looking at pictures. Roland in an agony at every play lest Margaret should be offended at some joke in it. He was surprised to hear her laugh girlishly, unrestrainedly, at one comedy.

"She did not understand," he said; "saw it was funny, but did not see the joke's real meaning."

In a few days Margaret wearied of Paris; scolded Roland for rank extravagance, as he loaded her with presents, and said they would go home.

"I thought we might go out in the evenings sometimes," she said one day. "Be Bohemian, Roland, over here."

He shook his head sharply. She did not understand. He would not take her anywhere, or let her see the ripplings of the underworld's tide where it frothed softly on the bar.

"I couldn't take you to any of these places, Madge." He had called her Madge at first. "You could see people there—people you would not like to see."

A faint sigh. Then: "Let us go home, Roland. I am tired of this."

But first she told him she was going out by herself for nearly a whole day. "There is a church near here," she almost faltered. "I have a friend there—a nun."

"You'll let me see you out to it, Madge?"

"I had rather you did not, Roland. I want to go alone."

She was going to pray there, he told himself, unravelling the riddle to his own satisfaction. Would have no husband with her when she went to her girlhood's friend.

He sat and dreamt of her through the long day. Was sitting in the hall at the Meurice when a cooing voice roused him.

"Sir Roland—all alone, and in the dumps."

Mrs Greene, in grey, her fair hair flat about her simpering face. Her hard, cruel little eyes half-veiled by their long lashes. Something furtive, feline, in the woman. One almost expected claws to peep from the white, babyish hands.

"I'm over for a week." Mrs Greene sat down. "I should love tea, Sir Roland, wouldn't you?"

He had been waiting for Margaret, but he rang and ordered, resignedly. Vera Greene never paid for a meal if she could help it.

"Yes, I want some little frocks. I ran over. I think dear Lady Cosway may meet me here, and my sweet Agatha—poor foolish child."

"How foolish?" he said, startled.

"Entangling herself with little Tony Lessingham. An impossibility—penniless. Dear Ruth is bringing her here, and Mr Levenge meets us. A splendid match for Agatha, Sir Roland."

He paid for the tea and watched Mrs Greene absorb unwholesome fairy-like cakes; golden-buttered toast.

"Levenge?" he said. "Ruth is my cousin, Mrs Greene. Levenge?—Is he the man who's been so ill?"

"He is a little frail. Nothing that matters. He has millions. I travelled over with dear Lila Storme," mused Mrs Greene. "She was so anxious to lose me, there must have been *some* reason, hey, my friend?"

"And you are looking for it," he said dryly. "Hey, my friend?"

"I—indeed no." She was shocked, amazed. "I would not for the world. London will soon be full, you know. I hope you're coming up. I saw Mrs Hillyard there, lunching with Lord Cliffording. People are truly forbearing there; and poor Lettice Helmsley with her husband. Poor girl, I fear she got herself into sad mischief that Ascot week."

"Because you saw her with her husband," said Roland, patiently.

"Oh, she looked dowdy, shabby. I suppose he put his foot down and is acting the stern spouse. I

heard him say, 'Meet me for tea, Lettice.' Oh, at some impossible place. Poor man!"

So from name to name, letting none alone; stabbing reputation with her sharp tongue; hinting when she knew no certainty.

Roland wrote something in his pocket-book. They would shoot Lyme Regis in November. He meant to ask the Helmsleys down together.

"And you—where is dear Margaret? I saw her after *déjeuner* in the Rue de la Paix. She jumped into a taxi before I came to her, but I heard her tell the man to drive to Père Lachaise."

"To Père Lachaise," he said, startled again. "The cemetery?"

"Yes." Oh, scent of scandal; the little fair hound's head went down to it, nosing eagerly. "Did you not know, Sir Roland? To see some dear friend's grave, no doubt."

"Margaret went to see a friend, a nun," he said. "No doubt she is dead."

"They bury nuns in their convents," said Vera, softly. "Perhaps Margaret went to see the place. But she had a lovely wreath of lilies. I noticed that. Dear Margaret—how naughty of her to leave you alone."

"Am I not comforted?" he said, with a spasm of gaiety, yet his mind was troubled. "She is late, too," he added.

"Ah, look," the little pointed face set tensely. "Look, Sir Roland. Lady Devoraux and Billy Martin here. Oh, quite brazenly disgraceful. The case comes on some time in the winter."

Roland wearied of scandals, yet in a way this little sleuth-hound of high Society amused him. Sweet

retribution; the woman loved to think of other people's troubles; saw tragedy hang sharp-beaked; and had no thought of how the curved bill picked at tiny hearts. He was a gentle bird of evil to her, croaking over her shoulder as she read her letters in bed, or studied the newspaper for little rags to piece into her day's patchwork.

"Yes, quite sweet," she cooed softly. "He changed his religion, divorced a stout and virtuous wife to marry Meta. And Meta has found Billy much more amusing in just two years. Is it not retribution? He's a big, fierce creature, who flung everything over for love of Miss Meta. Tiens! It's a funny world."

Fun! in this medley of trouble. In an elderly woman's loss of love and husband, by trumped-up evidence; in an elderly man's mad passion for a merry butterfly; and now in this fresh scandal, breaking Meta Devoraux's mother's heart. She was flying to Paris now to hush things up; to take her daughter home and hope people would forget. Small hope, since Vera had seen the two here.

"Ah, Margaret!" He sprang up eagerly as the tall, slender figure came through the glass doors, dark furs about her pretty neck, her gown deep purple, her hat black. Almost a mourning dress.

"I am late, Roland." Margaret started, seeing Mrs Greene; turned quickly from the light. "Ah, you, Vera. Coming for frocks, I suppose?"

The tired note of tears hung in Margaret's voice. She still kept her face in the shadow.

"You found your friend, Madge?" he asked.

"Yes, Roland, I found her."

Up went the scandal-monger's little head.

"I am very tired, Roland. I'll go to my room for a little."

When Roland asked her about the lilies she said quietly she had been out to put them on a grave. No more.

Then, since nothing must be passed over, Mrs Greene took a taxi next day and drove to the vast cemetery. As well search for needles here in proverbial haystacks as a sheaf of white lilies on a grave. Yet nosing, questioning, questing, she found two sheafs of lilies, browned from a chill, cool night. One lying where Marie Lacresse reposed under a white mass of sculptured angels, with all her virtues set forth in black lettering. Another laid against a little marble cross, with, carved on it, "Marguerite, died June 7th." No more.

It went down in the mental note-book, treasured even if uselessly. Marie Lacresse was blameless wife and mother, lately buried; but of Marguerite no one knew, save that she was a child.

They left Paris the day the Cosways arrived. It was Roland's first meeting with Lord Cosway, a pursy, fussy little person, who thundered orders at the world, and quite forgot that they were all directed by his wife. He was a cipher in every eye save his own.

Agatha looked troubled, her eyelids were faintly red, she occasionally sniffed. Her big, healthy girlhood seemed to rebel at trouble. She was meant to be placidly, crudely happy, absorbing the sun and wind and rain as a flower does.

"Oh, Roly," she said eagerly, glad to see him, "and oh, why are you going away next moment?" She kissed Margaret affectionately, clinging to the tall girl in a childish way.

"I did want to see you, Roly—I did."

"You must come to see us, Agatha." Margaret liked the big, fair child.

"Oh, if I might. I'd love to. May I, mother?"

Lady Cosway was simply charmed, yet thought not, smoothly. She had no intention of letting Agatha go at present.

"So very, very sorry, but dear Agatha was engaged for *all* October."

"We are having our housewarming in November." Margaret saw the girl's eager look. "Why not come then, if you would also, Lady Cosway?"

"November—" A moment's thought. A look at Agatha. Then sweetly delighted acceptance.

"We are over for a run in dear Paris," said Ruth Cosway, "and then on for a trip in Mr Levenge's yacht. Ah, there is Mr Levenge. I don't think you know him, Roland."

A thin man, the yellow white of ill-health on his skin; narrow-chested, badly made, his hands coldly damp as he shook hands.

Illness had not dimmed fiercely burning eyes, and his mouth was full and sensual. The animal was triumphant over the illness of the man. Often in pain, drugged, unwholesome; Agatha's fair bigness, her buoyant perfect health, appealed to him beyond all else.

Her thick creamy skin, powdered by healthy brown; her pink colour and clear eyes; her deep chest and wide hips. She was a splendid specimen of young womanhood, and the millionaire was prepared to give heavily for her.

"Oh, what a sacrifice." Roland shuddered. The man offended him, with his burning eyes, gloating on big, awkward Agatha.

"Aggie, can I help?" he whispered. "We must dine now. We're off in an hour. But if I could help—"

"Oh, if mother would let me sit with you at dinner. Then I could talk to you about it."

Mother would not. She had been very kind to Roland until he married. The kindness was wasted, and except at his second wedding she had not seen him for years. Agatha, big, fair prisoner, went dolefully to dress. Roland forgot to tell Margaret of his cousin's troubles. He would not discuss Levenge with her. She might ask questions—questions he could not answer.

That was all over a month ago. October was going to rest, and they were back in the home Margaret loved so dearly.

No husband could have been more devoted. He watched for every wish; thought no sum too large to gratify a whim of Margaret's. But she was his love and not his boon companion. The sense of unworthiness weighed him down. He would sit brooding sometimes, wishing it were otherwise, and Margaret, watching him, thought her own thoughts.

"Does he weary of the quiet here? Does he ever regret that actress wife?" She was not the first. It was always bitter.

Extra servants came to the warren of rooms behind the green swing-doors. A house in itself, the maids' wing, where the old housekeeper locked her doors at night, and did not know the new London footmen called it the Seraggliho; and the men's wing, long and straggling, showing how many servants might be housed to keep up Lyme Regis.

How they gossiped there and squeaked and giggled and discussed the other world they served.

"Quite decent sort, Sir Roland," a footman dealt airily with his master. "Don't say much, but says it civil. Not 'ere you dawg, like some of them parvenoo fellers. Blow 'em! Nice man to live with. Got into some mess, didn't he, as a youngster? Chorus girl—an' queer at that, I ham led to understand—"

"I was at Silver Beeches when he come there." This from a fair housemaid. "Lucy, Lady Grace's maid, said as how her ladyship was to marry some parson chap, Sir Roland being married already. Told me afterwards the parson was fit to be tied losin' her. Nice quiet lady she is too—never worries for trifles."

Margaret was a born Grande Dame. Too much so in a way. She would take the menu from the smart young cook.

"Yes, that will do, Browne. It seems excellent. Wait! no, not this dish with Hollandaise. Sir Roland likes something plainer. An omelette. A soufflé. Change it! You say you will not find the range good when we have our party. We must have it altered then. And supplies—please give your list to Mrs Hendricks—she will see to it."

Then later: "Roland, the woman wants a new range in the kitchen. This one is slightly out-of-date. Will you tell Paul to order one? We could go away for two days—or there is a second range to cook by, I believe."

Mrs Hendricks, having kept house for the African millionaires, was trained to economy. She remonstrated, plaintively.

"Milady, Miss Browne is most extravagant. She writes to Buzzard—to Gunter. Milady, they get a commission on these things, and I do think there ought to be a check."

"But if she wants the things." Margaret could not understand how these lists could matter. A few more almonds, pistachio nuts, a little extra caviare or truffle. One must not vex a good cook.

So Browne had carte blanche, triumphantly. A saucy damsel this Miss Browne, from a great school of cookery.

"And the range, milady," Mrs Hendricks came waddling again to Margaret's morning-room. "It cooked for forty in Mr Stedway's time, so it did. There's side ovens and electric stoves an' Bang Marys. It is not really wanted, this new one."

"It's ordered now, Mrs Hendricks, I'm sorry," said Margaret, carelessly.

She had never known the value of money; there had been always enough, and to Margaret a new range, a host of plumbers, meant nothing.

If pert Browne were offended, the first house-party might not be a success.

"She's a lady, she is," said Miss Browne to the lady's-maid and the butler, as they dined in the housekeeper's room. A dinner poor clerks would have envied; roast chicken, a ham, cold galantine, cold sweets and cake. Miss Browne was inclined to chilly things. The contents of the mysterious boxes from London would have explained the reasons.

If no accounts were inquired into it was easy to order moulds which would have cost her hours of labour.

Paul Hesling sighed at the monthly bills. Grey old Basling wandered through the sweet-breathed herd of jerseys, and both thought of Roland's emptying purse. Lyme Regis, opened up, was a maelstrom dragging down boats of gold.

The shooting promised to be fairly good. Roland

was busy seeing to stands for the drives; tramping through the carpet of brown leaves, watching the graceful birds who were reared with skill and trouble that man might count his bag.

Wild things had their chance when honestly walked up with dogs. Now the glades were slaughter-houses, with the tally of the number slain, an important item to think of.

Margaret read the long menu for her first dinner happily. It was very long, very elaborate. Miss Browne stood aggressively confident before her employer.

"H'm!" A pencil score against a second entrée. "Not two cold things, Browne. Substitute something hot for the second. You see—salmon cutlets in mayonnaise. Epigrams of chicken in chaufroid. Too much like supper, I think."

Gently afraid too of offending the self-satisfied lady who deigned to cook for her.

"With only three kitchen-maids, milady, it is so difficult to have everything hot."

"Get four then, Browne; five, if you need them. I want this party to be a great success. I should like some new dishes. Something invented, you know. A sauce—an entrée."

"Oh, yes, milady, quite easy."

"Lord love you, invent!" said Miss Browne, flouncing off. "But we can re-christen, and that's as good to us."

Great rooms were being opened. An army of housemaids plucked holland covers from the sheeny damask in the great drawing-room. Smiling Dresden shepherdesses, pathetic Staffordshire wine-bibbers were being laid about on tables and cabinets.

Margaret stood to drink in the beauty of the stately hall, with a sigh of pleasure. It was so mellow in its soft warm dimness. A huge fire crackled on the open hearth, and hot pipes ran hidden round the walls. Skins of splendid beasts were on the dark oaken boards. Old tapestries hung on the panelled walls. The staircases, two in number, opened from the inner wall, their wide shallow steps uncarpeted. The walls were papered in deep yellow brown, toning with the oak all round them.

A noble home, with echoes of the past ever drifting through it.

One of the footmen brought a telegram.

"Oh, I hope no one's going to disappoint. A moment, William. It is William, isn't it?"

"Yes, milady."

"Cosway unable to come. May Mr Levenge—good shot—replace him?—RUTH COSWAY."

"I don't know the man. But Ruth is Roland's cousin. It must be all right."

"I have brought a form, milady."

"Certainly—delighted.—MARGARET MAINWARING."

Poor little Agatha! who had hoped for a week's freedom.

Roland, coming in for lunch, opened his letters. One was written in a scrawling round hand, bold and half-formed.

"DEAR ROLY,—You were always so kind. Oh, please send a wire to Tony Lessingham, Naval and Mili-

tary, and ask him for the week. *And* DON'T, DON'T say I asked you. But, oh, please, Roly! I'm having such a bad time. He shoots like an angel. He'll sleep in a stable if you've no room. It's important. Honest it is! And I'll never forget it to you.—Your loving cousin, AGGIE."

Another form hastily written on. The wires flashing invitation to Tony Lessingham.

"Oh, Roland"—Margaret looked up from her elaborate pigeon pie—"Roland, Lord Cosway cannot come."

"It makes the guns right then, for I've just asked another man," answered Roland. "This thing's all spice," he said to himself; and manlike, sighed for plain chop or beefsteak.

"Oh, but—I filled his place. I hope it does not matter, Roland." Margaret had kept the wire; threw it across to him.

Roland read it and swore softly to himself.

I wouldn't have had the man here for anything. "Oh, of course, it doesn't matter, dearest. It was Ruth's fault. You could not know."

"He is a friend of your cousin's, Roland. What's wrong with him?"

They were alone, but he could never talk to Margaret as other men talk to their wives. Always the halo about her head; the white barrier round her; she was above him. A saintly thing who must not hear of the everyday sordid things of life.

"Oh, nothing you would understand, Margaret. He—has a record. I cannot understand Ruth thinking of sacrificing Agatha to him. It is that, a sacrifice." He left his mound of jellied, highly-spiced pie

alone and took some cold ham and potatoes, their humble flouriness disguised by sauce of parsley, cream and chopped eggs.

"It may alter his whole life, if he loves her." Margaret took a woman's view.

"It cannot alter his past. Such men, unless I am a prejudiced judge, cannot love truly. With them love signifies—a—a—word I'd rather not use—"

Margaret sighed faintly. "You are very careful of my morals, Roland."

He looked up, astonished. She was smiling, almost mischievously, a curiously girlish look on her sweet face.

It was as if a saint in some cool chapel had stepped from its niche to pray among the worshippers.

"I—" he stammered. "Oh, here's Paul."

The moment was gone. Paul had lunched, but he came hurriedly in to take directions about to-morrow's luncheon.

"Was it to be at the West Gate, or at the hut by the Knoll?"

"By the Knoll; the ladies will want to join us, and it's a mile nearer. You've seen to the stoves, Paul?"

"Oh, yes. The hot food will be all right."

"Madge, an hour alone before we meet all these people. An hour in your little room."

The room he had furnished for her—the walls hand-painted with sprays of big daisies; the chintz made specially; the carpet deep green moss. A cosy little place on this cold afternoon.

"Oh, Roland, I am sorry. I have promised to go to the village to see old Mrs Edgar, to take her books and jellies and chicken. Mr Leland asked me to. I

shall be back before anyone comes." Then she hesitated, offered to send the things, and stood waiting.

Above him. He asked for the joy of an hour with her, sitting before the fire, her fair head against his knees. She would go out into the grey day to see some sick old woman. It would be wrong to interfere.

"Very well, dear." His eyes wistful, as he looked at her. "You are so wonderfully good, Margaret. I'll go to the beech wood then, with Paul. You are a saint, my Margaret."

"I wish I were," she said, half to herself.

The hum of arrival stirred Lyme Regis. Motors purring up the wide avenues. The big buses jolting from the station with loads of ponderous luggage. Long trunks, mounds of square cardboard boxes, since my lady's hats must each travel alone.

Men came chilled from their journey. Clever women fled to their rooms before their veils were removed, to wield the magic of face creams and powders, to arm themselves for their tourney.

Only Agatha, big and doleful, dragged off her heavy veil and stayed with Margaret.

"I'd rather not go and tidy, mother. I don't care if I do look blue and horrid"—this viciously to Margaret. "I wish I'd been born with a squint."

"You don't really, child." Margaret poured out hot tea and put the girl in a deep chair in the shadow. She saw traces of tears on the white eyelids.

"How delightfully warm in here." Walter Levenge, emerged from his astrakhan coat; he was shivering, unwholesomely blue. Just too well turned out among the other men.

"You feel the cold?" Margaret asked. Woman-like, she pitied invalids. "Of course, if you are ill."

"Ill!" Walter Levenge was not ill. Denied the idea hotly. It was the wretched climate, the hideous chill and damp. He was very strong now. Yet he coughed suddenly, a paroxysm which racked him.

"Tea, Lady Agatha?"

"I've got some, thank you." Agatha was frankly ungracious, awkwardly repellent. "You won't take tea, will you, Mr Levenge? Peptonized milk, is it?"

"A little foolish rule of my physician. Yes—if no trouble." A footman speeding for a jug of boiled milk.

"'E's a nice 'ealthy sort of blighter, that. Here, bile it up, Miss Merry, there. Bile it! He'd scent its bein' only warmed. Lor! I knows him. I was at Tatsley when he was dying out. Just totterin' on his legs, but they bolstered 'im up. A mean felly he is. Wish it may scald 'is vitals, so I does."

Then William, decorously wooden, returned with boiling milk.

Agatha sat dolefully by the tea-table, but despair could not check her healthy appetite. Fascinated, envious, Levenge watched the big girl munch hot buttered scones, go from those to petit fours, all jam and sugar and almonds, and on to heavy plum-cake, and back to scones and sandwiches, and drink three cups of well creamed and sugared tea.

The tide flowed in. Friends of Margaret's principally. Roland had been so long away. But one man was eagerly greeted. An old fellow now, grey-haired, erect, light on his feet as a boy. A boy's heart behind the failing framework of flesh and blood.

"Roland, dear old fellow. I am so glad to come—so glad to see you here like this."

"Yes, I hardly deserved it, sir, in my folly."

"Folly never of your making, Roland. But I knew you'd fight through. There was too good stuff in you to sink—"

The Helmsleys had come by train. Pretty Lettice, afraid her frocks would not be fine enough, and with her a square-jawed, honest-eyed man, one of life's fighters in hard waters.

"I haven't shot for years. I hope I shan't disgrace you. It was awfully good of you to think of us," said Tim.

Roland liked him from the first.

"To get away with Lettice, too. It's a regular holiday." There was something happily boyish about Tim Helmsley.

Roland smiled. No signs here of a quarrel and covert disgrace.

Mrs Helmsley was prettier than ever, if her gown was palpably two years old.

Margaret was pleased as a child with her party. Her deep blue dress showed off her golden hair, her delicate colouring; she moved in her slow graceful way, an old-fashioned hostess trying to see each guest was happy.

"I do hope it's not going to be a tea and boiled eggs at eight kind of party," whispered Mrs Greene to Lila Storme; the little pirate had coaxed an invitation from Lady Grace. They were well freighted merchant ships at big house parties.

"You know—hostess at the head of the table—tea cooling in expensive cups, and fried bacon and sausages congealing on the side-table. I do like my breakfast in my room or at my pleasure when I come down to it. By the way, do look at the Helmsley

woman—she's afraid even to sit away from her husband."

Poor Lettice, who had got as near to her man as she could, and was watching everyone in placid happiness.

"I wonder what Sir Mark will say. He's here. I saw his name on a door. By the way, have you heard—?"

Whisper, whisper, as reputations were torn to shreds under manicured, white fingers.

The party was not too well arranged. Lady Grace was willing to ask almost anyone to show off Lyme Regis and Margaret. So Lady Jean Trent and Lady Halsome had to eye, with some dismay, some of their fellow guests. Mrs Greene wormed in everywhere, but Lila Storme was a little—well, you know—

Pretty Beryl Halsome hinted this plainly to her hostess.

"She's really not a nice person, dear Lady Mainwaring. You met her at Silver Beeches and didn't know, but she won't be there again."

This in a few days' time, when the pirate had unfurled her black flag just a little too plainly.

Mrs Greene strolled to the tea-table. She was one of the thick-skinned women who always look the same. Years touched her lightly. Her meek, flaxen hair was so plainly done, her smile one of such set sweetness.

"Dear Margaret, what a glorious house. Quite a palace, dear. I shall get lost here with those two staircases. He! he! I remember at Tatway. It was so awkward. Poor Amy Delapore, you know—and Jack Delapore wouldn't believe for ages that it was a mistake. You extravagant monkey, Margaret, all your lovely cakes from Buzzard."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Margaret, carelessly. "Browne makes them."

"My dear, I couldn't mistake this. Your hall's as handsome as Loughton Priory; the panelling is divine. We've not met since Paris, have we? Since you were off to the cemetery there with your flowers."

"I." Margaret started, turning very pale. "Yes." A jug of cream at her elbow crashed over and she began to take it up slowly with a tiny gilt spoon. "I was going to put them on a friend's grave, Vera."

On a friend's grave. If Vera only knew if the lilies she had found were those she had seen in Lady Mainwaring's hands.

Vera strolled on; she stopped by Lettice Helmsley.

"My dear Mrs Helmsley. Not seen you since Ascot. You've been keeping your naughty little wife all to yourself, Mr Helmsley."

"She has been keeping herself all to me," laughed Tim Helmsley, happily.

"You've been missed, my dear. Missed! You'll have to look after her *very* carefully here, Mr Helmsley. Ah, there is Sir Mark now."

Lettice started, turning scarlet. Big, handsome Mark Deleraine, always a personality among his fellows. His dark eyes looking critically from woman to woman.

"A friend of yours, Lettice."

"He was, Tim. I have not seen him for months."

But the poison was working. Tim Helmsley bit his lips. So that was why Lettice had come flying home. He trusted her, but—he knew human nature. He remembered the season when he had never seen his wife, when she had blossomed into new frocks and come home in taxis, and talked of lunching at the

Berkeley, and having tea at the Carlton. She had not come to him for extra money.

Suspicion, sharp-toothed fox, gnawing at another heart.

And Lettice. After the first flush she had grown white. How handsome Mark was! She had been proud of her annexation; now she would see him at some other woman's side; she remembered his quick voice, his way of settling everything; of putting her first and the world last. And then the little, half-veiled speeches, meant for her alone.

She had done right, thought Lettice. Run away from all her fun. Now, was Tim going to be angry and tiresome? The visit was spoiled, almost before it began.

The poison dropper slipped on. It was dear Lila next.

"You must look your best now, Lila, dear. The Helmsley woman is glaring at Sir Mark."

On to Jean Trent; the dark beauty greeting her coldly. There was no joint in the armour of her happiness. But grey-eyed Beryl Halsome was different.

"Ah, Lady Halsome. Absolutely torn yourself away from Ireland. How nice! Are you hunting over there? Or perhaps you do not care to hunt now. A sad memory for you."

Little Vera had been out when Halsome's first wife had been drowned out hunting, having ridden to her own death, deliberately. Beryl Halsome flushed angrily.

"I should like," said Lady Jean, truculently, "to impale that woman and watch her writhing to her end, with all the lives she spoils tickling her feet."

"My dear Jean!" said Beryl.

"I *would*," said Lady Jean. "In a former life she must have been one of the things who search the ash-bins for treasures. The creature lives on garbage,

and the worst of it is she picks it up and labels the bin she took it from, *et . . . voilà tout.*"

Margaret wore her crown of daisies that night. She was in silvery green, very fair and gentle and flower-like herself.

Gauze and satin and lace and silk merged and shimmered and contrasted in the huge drawing-room, as the women came in, foiled by the sombre setting of man's funereal evening-dress.

Lila Storme wore white, unsuitably innocent, until you saw its cunning lack of bodice material and its frail hold on jewelled shoulder-straps. A splendid ruby necklace, treasure from an old merchant ship who was nigh to the dock of eternity, hung on the woman's white throat.

She did not know, as she clasped it on, how a dry-eyed old woman, sending for her jewels to the bank when the old man was dead, had found this gone, and had traced it, and been too proud in her misery to take any notice.

A lifetime's faith, an old wife's memory of the dead, were destroyed by that gift of rubies.

Agatha's big figure was gowned in fluffy blue. It accented her sensible waist, her round hips and heavy limbs. Her mother's choosing, it was not becoming. Agatha did not seem to care. She stood with her chin sunk on her white neck, her eyes flashing defiance at a thin, pale man near her, his shirt fastened by a monstrous black pearl.

"Historical," he said to her, seeing her look at it. "I'd like to see you wear it, Lady Agatha."

"I like horses better than pearls," very sulkily.

"You could have both; the best hunters in the world. Buy them yourself, too."

"And hunt them at Mentone," said Agatha, with a spasm of humour. "Yes, I—"

Her big eyes grew round, her cheeks flushed. She had not spoken to Roland or heard from Tony. Now she saw him with Roland, coming to look for his hostess.

"You've not met Captain Lessingham, Margaret. He came at short notice, most kindly."

"Just ripping of you to ask me," returned Tony, frankly.

Ruth Cosway sat down heavily, got up and rushed at Roland.

"Roland, how could you. The man's impossible, and wants to marry Agatha. Oh, you'll spoil everything."

"I—you did not tell me anything, Ruth. And why impossible? He's young and clean and healthy."

"On five hundred a year. Oh, Roland, I must send Agatha away. Or go myself—if Agatha talks to him at all."

A flutter of Roland's eyelid on his cheek. A word aside. "Agatha, hi! Walk discreetly. Don't talk to Tony—I won't allow it. But, there's a den of mine. You get in from the terrace on the east door. If you should want a quiet half-hour—alone, of course—well, it's there—"

"Roland! You silly idiot," said Lady Agatha, elegantly, as she took Mr Levenge's arm.

Was it chance, or a juggle arranged by Roland with his butler, that on the other side she should find Tony. With her mother obscured by tall pots of forced bulbs, Agatha was enabled to enjoy her dinner.

Her calmly, steady wading through the menu was always a marvel to Levenge; he picked at some sole, and ate vegetables and toast and drank claret.

It was a heavy dinner, elaborate and lacking originality.

"There's a confectionery air about it," remarked Vera Greene, sweetly, as she smashed down an edifice thick with jellied cream and gilded sweets. "It's either done by a marvellous cook or it all comes in—"

They wanted mysterious sauces, these people with jaded appetites. Soufflés, omelettes en surprise. Pêche Melbas; there was a shoppy look about the over-decorated mayonnaise; the white truffled cutlets; the big, tasteless sweets.

Delicately beautiful, Margaret's blue gown showed up her white neck, her hair shone against the dark background of her high carved chair.

"I knew you would prove yourself, Roland," Lord Hill said afterwards, and looked admiringly at his hostess, when after dinner they gathered in the warm hall. "Even in the choosing of a wife, my boy."

Roland flushed painfully.

"The first, Roland, chose herself," said Hill, quietly. "Ah, Lady Mainwaring, I've been standing here admiring you."

Women are never tired of admiration when it is before the men they love. Margaret's smile thanked him.

"Oh, Roland," she said, "I forgot to tell you. Ralph Knox Harding is coming here on Saturday. He has asked them to let him preach on Sunday."

"Yes, Margaret." But to Roland, as to others, there came poison in the cup. He dreaded the thin, severe face, the mask dragged down on the sensual features.

"Yes, Margaret," he said quietly.

"Yet I am churlish, inhospitable. I wish he was not coming," he said to Paul. "I am half afraid of the man."

CHAPTER IX

Rows of gaily-plumed bodies made sturdy keepers joyous—they had proved their worth—the arrogance of the keeper grows thin nowadays, when motors are ousting them from small places. Panhard and De Dions and their kinds usurp the income which was apportioned to the preserving of pheasant and partridge.

"A good shoot, I think." Roland had forgotten fear of misfortune. He had shot cleanly and well, with Margaret often watching him.

The party was for a week, with a Sunday thrown in. Everyone seemed happy. Margaret was radiant for a time. She did not hear the gentle, pointed grumblings at her housekeeping.

"My digestion will not assimilate chicken in aspic and mayonnaise for breakfast," murmured Maurice Trent, mournfully, "and the eggs, alas! are thinking of old times. Why doesn't Roland pack off the cook?"

Elaborations, even at the shooting luncheons—and the hot Irish stew a failure.

The party seemed a whole, yet a dozen little dramas were played out, each on their own small stage.

Ruth Cosway fussed plaintively, watched Agatha as a cat watches mouse-holes.

"Mother, we are going down to the guns for lunch."

"Then I must come, my dear." It meant the sad

quitting of a warm fire and a book in gay binding, and the gentle slumber when the book proved dull, the pleasant dallying over lunch in a warm dining-room and not out in a draughty hut with everyone talking of slaughter and their share in it.

Yet Agatha must not go alone. "Your brown dress, my love, and your brown felt hat—it suits you so well. Now, I am ready."

A martyr tramping along damp rides, wading through wet, fallen leaves, the chill of November striking drearily.

Walter Levenge, muffled in woollen ties and divers garments, shivered at his stand and shot indifferently. A shaking hand is not quick on the trigger, and weak eyes which will not take to glasses are not steady on a rocketing bird.

"It's outrage—horrible!" Paul looked at the delicate millionaire with frank dislike. And there were other things—the case of his late wife, poor soul, wronged and ousted. Blacker stories still, which concerned card-playing and one of a girl's wrongs. Whispers, only half forgotten, of wild episodes in foreign hotels. A man who had lived for his self—his lower self—and paid the penalty with ill-health. In years to come he might be fairly strong again, but now, he was a wreck, being slowly towed shorewards. By sheer law of contrast he desired soft, healthy, stupid Agatha—wanted a son to inherit his millions—to see youth and health by his side in his huge, splendid house in London.

There was a woman somewhere who had borne his name and been cruelly divorced because he had fallen in love with a young girl—a girl who refused to marry him, when her brother, putting the conventions of

reserve aside, to save his sister, told her the naked truth.

Yet now, as he was, whitewashed by years—mothers were ready to give this man their young daughters.

"We are so poor, you know," Ruth Cosway whispered to Margaret. "It would be so splendid for my boys. Agatha could do so much for them and for her sister."

"And—what of Agatha herself?" asked Margaret, directly.

"Oh-h! My dear, he is a multi-millionaire—she could forget him — think of her diamonds — her houses—"

"Think of her life, Ruth. Even with money one must live through the same hours as the paupers do, and marriage cannot be quite forgotten. Oh, no, I shall say nothing, but I think it's hateful."

Yet Agatha was behaving curiously well. She stood demurely obedient, to see pheasants missed or mangled, and merely looked with quiet significance at Tony's bag.

"Lessingham has topped all our scores," said Roland, pleasantly.

He had shown Agatha a modest doorway leading off the passage near the library down to his own sanctum and office, besides the outer one from the terrace.

"You can write your letters there," said Roland, innocently.

The hearty kiss which Agatha rewarded him with made him gasp.

"Roly! You're a love. I wish I'd married you, Roly."

"My character," said Roland, patiently, "is now gone for ever. Vera Greene has seen that embrace."

She had—and in an hour Margaret knew of it, but

not before Roland had, with the aggressor by the hand, fully explained.

"I have been forcibly kissed in my own house," he said gravely. "I feel sure Margaret will now pack your boxes." So the sweetly-told scandal lacked flavour.

"That dear child," Vera had come smiling, "she is devoted to her cousin, Margaret dear; there was some idea of a match once, surely. I saw quite a loving greeting to-day—on the stairs."

"Yes, wasn't it amusing?" said Margaret, quietly. "Agatha adores Roland—just at present."

The flaxen-haired little garbage-hunter had other games to see to; if Margaret was a trusting fool, she would let her alone.

Lettice Helmsley, having swept her heart clean, found old dust devils creeping into it.

Sir Mark met her so carelessly at first—almost as if he had forgotten.

Then when her vanity smarted he found her alone, sitting in a warm conservatory, more glass-roofed room than green-house—a lounge set about with plants. Lettice was disinclined for Bridge—she was not happy in her pretty lace gown. It lacked the stamp of the passing hour, even as her neck and arms lacked jewels among these rich women.

"Ah! Mrs Helmsley, sitting in the dumps. May I stay to cheer you up? What a sweet gown."

The man's voice was curiously attractive. His look banished her fears about her dress.

"An old one," she said half irritably.

"One I remember—surely—as I do everything I've seen you in." He sat down near her. "I've lost sight of you completely, Madame Greenie."

His name for her.

"Yes. I've given up going out."

"Well, next spring perhaps you might relent and lunch with me." He talked with set purpose of fun passed and to come—of theatres—suppers—dances—of her pet dishes and flowers.

The noisy hum of the city restaurant seemed to din in Lettice's ears—the plain food—the busy preoccupied men all round her.

"I am not well enough off to go out," she said squarely, whipping her shying conscience to the drear straight road. "And it means leaving Tim."

"No choice he's off to his people at Christmas. I could get a table for one of the big dinners. Savoy or Carlton. Or if we could be in Paris for the Tour d'an. It's rather ripping there. You could bring a friend along, of course."

Perhaps she had been a fool to be afraid—to look at the worst side of things. Lettice began to reprove the evil thoughts in her mind. Why shouldn't a man be kind to a pretty friend?

"You ran away cruelly from Silver Beeches—without a word to a pal," he said, picking up her little cheap fan.

"I—had to go; there was a wire for me," she lied with open lameness.

"Yes, but you refused my invitations afterwards."

"Tim was—not well. I had to stay to look after him."

"Poor, good little lady!" Her gauze fan snapped in his fingers, the frail sticks broke. "Oh, clumsy," he said, "but it was not worthy of you. You shall have another." And Tim had bought her this as a little present, the day before they started for Lyme Regis.

"I thought you might like it," he had said boyishly. "It's rather a jolly little one."

Did they think they could sit there alone with Mrs Greene trailing softly about, picking up her day's prizes?

She owed Sir Mark a grudge. He had dared her tongue once, when she had hinted at silence, and silence with her meant some slight reward. Lettice was not worth anything.

Tim Helmsley had just finished a rubber at Bridge and was coming for a drink; he was not very fond of the game, so having found a substitute, cut out gladly.

He looked round for Lettice. In such a large house lost people took some finding. The billiard-room was down a long corridor—she might be there—or writing in the morning-room or in the lounge, or in the big drawing-room, playing.

"I wonder where Lettice is?" He looked round, less boyishly good-humoured than he had been two days before.

"Mrs Helmsley is in the conservatory off the drawing-room," a gentle voice answered him. "She is sitting there among the flowers, looking, oh, so sweet!"

"I'll fetch her along," he said quickly, flushing at the praise.

"Sir Mark is with her. I expect she's coming. They were talking, so they did not hear me."

Hint and innuendo—the two were absorbed—that was what the words inferred.

"Oh, then she won't want me." Tim Helmsley strolled away with a poor attempt at indifference.

Upstairs in their luxurious bedroom he met Lettice coldly.

Bridge? Yes, he'd been playing Bridge. Oh, he'd lost, of course. He would never afford a week at one of these rotten house parties again—sheer waste of good money. What had she been doing?

"Oh, nothing particular, Tim—talking, writing letters. I sang for Lady Mainwaring."

"Did you? I'm dog sleepy—good-night."

Poor fools, when one was longing to take his wife in his arms and tell her he loved her, and the other to sit with her head against Tim's knees and tell him all else was folly except her love for him. Humanity delights in playing Blind-Man's-Buff with its life. Few drift quietly from source to sea on the river of life, hemmed in a narrow channel of convention's drab banks.

Sir Mark's man went to London early next morning, coming back with a large parcel and a gentle smile. In the dusk, when pleasantly tired men came to talk of their day's sport as they ate enormous teas, Sir Mark looked for Lettice.

She was prettier than usual, her colour high, the tea-gown she wore, soft and becoming. Lettice was drifting back to the ways of these new friends of hers. She was settling down again to conversation bordered on the south by lovers, and on east, west and north by new clothes. This pink-and-silver gown was a misfit of Margaret's—too gaudy for Lady Mainwaring's taste.

Lettice had been in Margaret's room that morning and heard it condemned.

"It does not fit, Susan, it is too tight. And I do not like the heavy silver coat. I must give it away."

Lettice looked eager—stammered. "If—I might buy it—it would fit me—I should love to—if Lady Mainwaring was not offended."

Margaret looked gently at Lettice.

"It would be so kind of you, but it's no value. Shall we say—" she named a tiny sum—would take no more.

So to-night Lettice preened in silver and satin and lace, no longer quiet dove among the birds of paradise.

Sir Mark saw the gown. He took Lettice her tea. "It's warm in the library—I want to show you something," he said.

When the party scattered, Lettice strolled to the fine old room, the walls lined with mellow, calf-bound volumes, some rare and almost priceless—the whole tint was that of brown, soft and restful.

Being away from the rest of the house, few people found their way to the library. The wide, deep windows looked out on the bowling-green, and beyond that to the lake. There was a secret chamber in the walls there, behind one of the old panels—one touched a spring and saw a little room, dimly lighted by a slit in the outer wall.

Sir Mark was waiting; he snapped on the light, flooding the room with soft, white glow.

"Ah! How good of you, Madame Greenie. See, smashed your fan. You must let me replace it."

"Oh, but—" she said.

"It's just like the other," he said quietly. "I wonder who is talking in there," he added. "I didn't know there were rooms beyond this—the servants', perhaps."

Like as a Vandyck is to its copy—the flimsy thing which he had broken was replaced by real lace and hand-painted panels, the bone sticks by ivory set with tiny jewels. It was a gorgeous thing, exquisitely pretty.

"Oh, no, it's not like mine. It's far too good." Lettice blushed hotly. "I can't take it."

"Not too good for you, little Greenie. Nothing could be. Come, don't be horrid. Let an old friend give it you. You bought the other for yourself, I'll be bound." And to hold it there was a long chain of fine gold, never designed to hold a fan. They sat there talking then. Who could run away from so kind a friend, until the gong boom passed unheard, and Lettice fled breathlessly to her room.

"Where have you been, Lettice? You will be late for dinner."

"I was in the library. I never heard the gong." Lettice plunged breathless into deep wardrobes, flurried the head housemaid into unwonted haste.

"Laws, ma'am, the hooks do go against you on puppus," said Stanson, irritably, as she fixed up Lettice's best evening-dress.

Tim Helmsley was in a kinder humour. He had won five pounds at Bridge—he had shot passably. He came into Lettice's room, waiting for her.

"That dress suits you, and how fine my little fan looks."

"Yes," she said nervously; she tried to push it away.

"I don't know how they do it." He picked the fan up. "The lace and painting looks top-hole now, doesn't it?"

"Yes," she said again. "Give it to me, Tim—there's the gong."

The lace and painting—this thing had cost as many pounds as his had shillings. Something hurt in Lettice's throat—she was half ready to fling the fan down and tell him, but there was no time then.

Sir Mark took her in to dinner. Helmsley's eyes clouded over again. His good-humour died. Vera Greene had sown her evil seeds, and as evil seeds do they were rooting and springing up apace. A sudden flash of thought. He had never seen that pink-and-silver gown before. Lettice generally came to him with her sketches and patterns; it was his delight to choose pretty cheap gowns for her.

"Agatha!" Lady Cosway called suddenly to her big daughter. "Agatha, there you are."

"Yes, here I am, mother." This very meekly.

"I went to your room at ten minutes to eight, Agatha. You were not there. Why were you so late?"

"I—I—could not get up, mother. I—was wandering about the house."

"There are miles of attics, I believe," said someone, "with chests and old treasures in them. We ought to explore on Sunday."

"We'll have a fancy-dress dance on Tuesday." A cry from someone. "Oh, do let's. We can wire for frocks and things."

Margaret was delighted. They could open the ballroom, send out invitations. Dinner was brightened by chatting of kings and queens and heathen deities.

"Sir Mark," said Lady Jean, pensively, "shall go as Solomon."

Sir Mark, who had a certain magnificent suit of armour, and who fancied himself as a Viking, inquired "Why!" in startled tones.

"I thought—it might be suitable," said Lady Jean, thoughtfully. "He was such a conqueror, you know. Or shall it be Alexander?"

"I cannot stand the man, Maurice." This to her

husband. "He is so self-satisfied, so full of recalling that a large detachment of men received their orders from him when they took a savage chief's wives and corpses away. It was that, wasn't it? It was just luck and a good constitution. You cannot pull a man out of the Mediterranean, you know, if you happen to be climbing Mont Blanc at the time."

"It is indeed true," said Maurice Trent, gravely. "Perhaps better explained if you had said—'Anyone else might have taken the chief's wives and—er—corpses.'"

Sir Mark was staring now at Lady Agatha, and evidently thinking deeply.

"I thought I recognized the laugh," he said to himself. "Where was the girl? She would not come through the library when we were there."

On the Saturday Ralph Knox Harding, his face set in its mask of austerity, was motored from the station. He bent low over Margaret's hands, kissed them affectionately with great humility.

"It is indeed good to see you here, happy in your own home," he said, rolling out his words. "Crowned by marriage, dear Margaret, in this noble house."

"Too noble, I fear," she said, laughing. "There are heaps of very naughty people here, Ralph. You must not be too easily shocked."

"Oh, were there?" He did not think that anyone who could be called naughty should be at a bride's housewarming. Ralph Knox Harding knew most of the scandals of the day.

It was mild mischief which made Margaret send him in to dinner with Vera Greene. And yet to her surprise the two got on admirably. Dinner over, they sat in the hall talking earnestly. With great regret,

of course, Ralph Knox Harding listened to each rounded tale of scandal, hearing them to the end so that he might thunder denunciation on the actors in them, and on the world which fostered them.

Why did Sir Roland ask these people here to be with his pure young bride? The clergyman's face was wrapt with anger.

"Sir Roland—he rather liked funny people, didn't he, dear Mr Knox Harding?"

"Yes, that's it—the kernel of it. Roland had liked queer people—the man wasted his first youth in riotous living," stormed Knox Harding, "married a —person—who was notorious. Oh, the taste sticks—it sticks. And now he has married my dear, fair Margaret, who scarcely knows where the evil winds blow from. He will lower her mind—teach her—" The man stopped and his face grew purple as some thoughts were too much for him.

Mr Harding's dark face seemed an ill omen to Roland when he came to breakfast next day. It was ill work to sit and eat heartily, while your guest drank cold water because he had not yet been to church.

"It's so far off and so late," said Roland, anxiously.

"It will make you ill, my dear fellow." This from Hill. "Honestly will. You'll pitch all the bitterness of destruction at us from the pulpit. A hungry man always sees the worst side of everything."

"I trust, Lord Hill, that a few hours' fast will not bias me."

"Lord! Yes, it will." Hill put away his poached egg and sighed. "Don't you bother, Roland. Galantine—mayonnaise—aspic. No, if there are kidneys there—or sausages—"

"There are sausages," said Roland, as he looked

close at something, "but they're cold and muffled up in something."

He went to church with Margaret and her cousin, and prophecy was true. Why should the preacher choose a sad and powerful text? Why preach on husks and prodigals that day? A clever, powerful speaker, the clear voice stabbed and thrust—a man who would save souls by fear and not from the hope of mercy. He would beat his sheep into the fold and shear them and stand them there, washed and shivering and afraid. The cruel tongue ran riot on Society's ills, on gluttony. "Meant for me," said Lord Hill, resignedly. And love of dress and self-indulgence. He used plain words too plainly, since there were young girls in the church, and young boys too, grinning with interest. He who sank might rise, but much would cling to him. No water save that of penitence could ever wash it off. And worse—worse still—he might make muddy any companion he took through life. Roland looked up and flushed. This was meant for him and he knew it.

It was an unpleasant sermon, hurting and searing. A few of the country people thought it fine, but those who hailed from London had heard too much. Stories of people they knew — stories even of themselves. Ruth Cosway sniffed at a little salts bottle and felt quite outraged. It was an offence on decency.

"For there are mothers," thundered Knox Harding, "who would give young girls to men with the mud clinging about them and watch their daughters' bridal robes bemired, if so they walk on a golden path. Fine houses, fine clothes, love of show,—these things are sapping England."

Agatha smiled quite sweetly during this part of the sermon—then Bridge and debts, and at last the end.

"The man's a fanatic," said Roland, sharply, as they came out of church. "He is so steeped in good he sees evil in everything; there's no broadmindedness about him."

"He showed a pretty knowledge of some well-known stories," said Hill, dryly. "Also a shrewd idea of what certain emotions feel like."

The afternoon fell dull and foggy, threatening rain. No one cared to go out into the cold. It was enlivened by a great many callers and an unanimous abuse of the weather.

"It is tea-time and we have just finished a lengthy lunch. And in two hours it will be time for dinner, so from hour to hour we stuff and stuff, and then from hour to hour we thirst and thirst," said Lady Jean, as she took a tiny piece of bread-and-butter. Mercy! what a charitable institution Society is, keeping all the patent medicine men and half the health resorts going. If we could only understand that it's not Homburg, but all we go without there, which cures us of our ills, eh, Sir Roland?"

Roland was boy enough to like tea, though hot toast and biscuits appealed to him more than arrays of cakes and sandwiches.

"There are no hot things." He rang for the butler.

"Browne says, Sir Roland, they didn't—that is—she didn't make any."

"Toast, then," commanded Margaret. "Piles of it, Bateson."

Kitchen-maids burnt their faces and discussed the greed of their employers bitterly. Miss Browne sniffed disdainfully. She ordered her biscuits and tea-cakes daily from London, and to-day's supply had not come.

Roland was ill at ease. There was a cloud on him

which he could not shake off—some fear of coming misfortune—some blow to be given in the dark.

Tea was half over when "Lidy Levesong" was announced. She apologized for her lateness. The motor had broken down and they had frankly come in to ask for a conveyance.

Lady Leveson was a tall, beaky-nosed woman, who would not willingly have come into a house containing Lila Storme. She brought her nephews with her—consequential, talkative men, who had just come back from some long travels.

The *Evening Star*. Roland started as he caught the name. One of the Levesons was talking to Lady Cosway. "You say she's run into a sister boat. We went out on her last spring."

Went out on her! Then they had travelled with Violet. Roland listened feverishly. There was nothing for a time—then he started again at the words:

"We had a concert on board, quite a row. There were two actresses and they danced just a little too much. One's dead, poor thing—so I heard afterwards."

"It's so unpleasant when those kind of things crop up," said Lady Jean, rather bored.

"Dreadful, isn't it? One told me she was a baronet's wife, I remember. She was put ashore ill at Las Palmas."

She was put ashore ill at Las Palmas. The room began to reel and rock. Roland had to grip at slipping senses.

She was put ashore—ill at Las Palmas. She—then—no—it could not be. Fate would not do so cruel a thing.

Violet put on shore ill—perhaps not dead, after all.

The man's voice went on carelessly. He did not know what depths he swam in.

"Or was it the other—I forget now. Oh, the car's round. Good-bye, Lady Jean. We're in a hurry, I know."

The room was clearing slowly. Roland felt his heart cease thumping. But—how these men had frightened him. How carelessly they discussed things, without knowledge of their importance. "She was put ashore at Las Palmas."

He could not get the words out of his head. He was white, his hands still clammy. Of course it was a mistake—a mere piece of inaccurate gossip. But—but—the solid world had slid beneath his feet, as through a mist he saw Margaret, his gentle Margaret, bidding these people good-bye.

If he had really done this thing to her—disgraced her—made her a woman who had lived with him without legal right to his name. She, the purest woman on earth.

Someone stepped from a dark corner near the fireplace, and stood looking at Roland.

"What was wrong with him? What has he heard?" said the clergyman intently to himself. "The man is ghastly and from fear—from fear." There is no escape from the past, said stern religion intolerantly. He went to Lady Jean. If it had been Mrs Greene she would have remembered every word, have pieced and patched them carefully. Jean Trent was smoking and dreaming of going hunting next week—when they were off to Meath.

"Oh, you, Mr Knox Harding," she said, looking up,

swinging her small feet backwards and forwards to show a flash of silk and buckles. "You were very stern in church to-day. It was all the cold water for breakfast, so Lord Hill told me. It must make one feel very unkind."

"It was not the cold water," he said gravely.

"It was certainly not honey," she mocked. "Rather mincemeat, and that highly seasoned with truth. Being a careless sinner, I like sermons on mercy myself. Have a cigarette?"

He would not go away.

"Thank you, I do not often smoke. 'Er—an interesting man who came with the fat old lady."

"A Mr Freeman. He was a hideous bore. He told me stories of travels until I naughtily yearned to yawn."

"Of travels—where?" This too eagerly.

Bright Lady Jean flashed a quick glance at him. "What do you want to know?" said her quick mind. Paul Hesling came up behind them. "What? Bridge, Mr Hesling? I should adore it—if you will promise to cut with me. Travels—oh, I don't know where," said Lady Jean. "Something about actresses who sang and danced and died, and Mr Freeman felt he had derived a lurid interest from having been on the same ship. And one was a duke's wife—or was it an earl's—I wasn't listening. It's not a Sunday tale, Mr Knox Harding."

She did not see, as he was behind her, that Paul Hesling had started almost as much as Roland had—that his face grew suddenly white.

"On what ship did you say this happened?" Knox Harding asked carelessly.

Paul Hesling tripped and stumbled, crashing down

one of Margaret's Sèvres cups. It brought him to Lady Jean's feet—as he picked up the pieces.

"Don't tell him," his lips formed silently.

"What ship? The *Night Hawk*—or was it the *Grosser Carl?*" said Lady Jean, carelessly. "One of the two."

"Why! What's amiss?" she asked, in her quick way. "What does that man want to know?"

"That is what I am afraid of." Jean Trent was one of those women men confide in instinctively, and as instinctively turn to for help. "I saw Roland with a face which frightened me, and I happen to know that those two men were passengers by the *Evening Star* to Durban."

Paul left Lady Jean to her four and looked for Roland.

"What is it? Did you hear anything?" he asked quickly.

"It was a fright, Paul, nothing more. I heard that man say that Violet went ashore at Las Palmas, and it seemed the end of the world for me. Then he said he had made a mistake."

"Of course he made a mistake," Paul laughed impatiently. "The agents had every proof of her death —and gave them to us."

The rush of relief was on Roland now. It had almost been worth the fear to look at Margaret and think that she was his wife. Folly to have felt this fear. To have shown it so openly.

Margaret was in her boudoir writing letters. He pulled her head back, kissing her eagerly.

"What is it, Roland? You don't look well—your hands are shaking," she said.

"I had a nightmare, sweetheart. Fell asleep and

dreamed that I had lost you, that some—disgrace—had parted us. Oh, Madge. If it were to!"

"I—oh, why, Roland?" Fear in her heart now. Had some of his old friends written to him, tried to see him? Were there some wild happenings in his past that she knew nothing of? What had he heard? She shivered.

"You must not dream these things," she said, a little coldly. "Poor mother would die if there was ever any scandal." She sighed bitterly then, deeply.

The very shadow offended her; what if the substance ever cropped up? So pure and tall and gentle. Roland dropped her hands. Was he ever worthy of her? Was she too good to be happy with him?

Another man, brought up in every-day life, would have treated his brief lapse lightly. To Roland it was black and degrading. Even in his moments of deepest love, it rose and came between them. He had written another woman's name across his life page—a woman who had lived lightly and shamefully, as he knew now. And worse—there were those few days of mad folly, when driven by the desire to gain knowledge he had plunged unwillingly into the glow-lit gloom of the underworld. He would think with a shudder of Lancelot Darcy Browne—of the foul speeches which Roland had laughed at, lest—lest he might be called an innocent baby—of Lancelot's friends—and they were less foul-tongued than his mentor.

Hard luck that clean insight, fair play had not been his, that he had not gone to a good public school and learnt there clean, healthy views of life.

He dressed slowly that night, listening for the sound of Margaret's voice, longing to be alone with her without their crowd of guests. She was his—his own.

Some day they would come to a fuller companionship. Some day—when his son—Roland started so suddenly that he upset a glass on his table, sending it down to shiver into pieces.

Grace, his man, picked it up stolidly.

His son—what if this had been true, and Margaret—he knew she longed for a child—she often talked shyly of it—and hoped she might have a boy.

But it was all folly. He pushed the haunting fear away and went down.

Sir Mark was abusing the cook as he came in—rather audibly.

"The woman hasn't an idea outside cold food," he heard. "I believe all the stuff comes from London."

"Hssh!" Mrs Greene raised a warning finger.

"She was rather a rotten woman," Roland thought absently. "She must go."

Tim Helmsley took Margaret in that night—her cousin sitting at her left. The old room glowed with deep yellow-shaded lights—the long table was decked with yellow narcissi, standing in silver bowls. It was a home to be proud of. Long as the table was, bright as the lights, there were corners far away in gloom—the men came noiselessly from behind a massive screen where the lifts clicked down to the kitchens.

Helmsley liked his hostess, found himself talking to her of travels and books, while Knox Harding sat silent, either a leader of conversation or not caring to join in it.

Margaret's youth had been spent in Scotland—at Dunleithness.

"I know the place well—I love it. There's good fishing there. I was staying at Aneath six years ago. Do you know the little place?—there's a curiously good

hotel there. I remember a pair coming in a car—it had broken down and crawled in—and the old lady telling me she thought it was an elopement—for the girl was crying. They—I say—Lady Mainwaring—steady—steady. Lettice, come here, Lady Mainwaring is fainting."

Margaret was ghastly pale, her breath coming in little faint puffs through pinched nostrils.

"It's nothing—nothing." She tried to sit up and slipped back again. "I am a little tired."

Signal then from matron to matron, important advice from Lady Grace.

"Stand away there—give the child air—air. H'm. Oh, she's told me nothing." This quite aside to Lady Cosway. "Now, Margaret dear, there! a little water—water. Sit quite quiet, precious—don't be frightened. What a blessing I am here. You'd all fuss round the child and give her champagne and slap her nose and pour feathers over her—and it's—nothing."

"Nothing, mother." Margaret sat up. "I don't know what happened to me. No, I won't lie down. I am quite well."

"Take care of your wife," said Lady Grace to Roland, with a meaning smile. "Now, don't look terrified, boy, she's got her colour back."

Paul Hesling sat silent when Margaret had gone away—he snapped little bonbons in his fingers, destroying their dainty prettiness, eating none. It was not illness—it was fear—he was thinking—that old look of terrified memory. What blight is on us tonight? "It's the raven," said Paul, and said it half aloud.

"You mean the parson man—who looks on as if all life was wronging him. Hey?"

"I didn't know I thought aloud, Hill. Yes, I did mean him. He worries Margaret to death when he is here. Roland's unfortunate marriage is never allowed to be forgotten and yet never openly mentioned, the truth being," said Paul, gloomily, "that she was just promising to marry Knox Harding when the incubus died—a union of spirits—two lives offered to good works. And *au fond*—I believe the man was as deeply and naturally in love as any whole-hearted sinner might be. It cannot be good to live kicking one's nature as Knox Harding does. Poor Margaret might have a rude awakening."

"Was it anything—that he said now?" Hill asked.

"No. Helmsley says he was talking of nothing—some fishing village in the Highlands—and Margaret fainted. But I do not like Knox Harding because I know he hates Roland."

Roland, still shaken, peace eluding him, went early to his room. Margaret was sitting by her fire. Her long golden hair loose, gleaming in the firelight—her soft arms slipping bare from her loose sleeves—one slender, blue-veined foot held naked to the blaze.

His love for her sprang up in him. He wanted to take her in his arms, to bend and kiss the white foot, to lose himself in the rapture of her nearness. Yearning tenderness — pride — all the old crude blessed emotions which move the sons of men held him—and yet he checked himself. Only took one hand and held it closely.

"Well again, sweetheart?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes, quite well, Roland." She had looked up at him with a question in her eyes—they dropped now and clouded.

"Your cousin leaves to-morrow. He—was he very fond of you, Margaret?"

"Fond of me?" She looked almost surprised. "In a way—yes, Roland. I was so lonely—so unhappy—and the only way to fill my life seemed to be to devote it to work. By taking his name I could have done it. Dear mother hampered me. I told him"—she blushed faintly—"it could be nothing more. And he too only wanted a helper, loving me in that way—poor Ralph."

If it had been any other woman Roland would have told her bluntly that this cousin of hers had been honestly and deeply in love with her, and with no common love but the deep passion of a man who lives behind bars of restraint. He could not say it to Margaret.

"I—it was very saint-like," he answered dryly, going away.

Margaret sat quiet, her face growing sad.

CHAPTER X

WINTER had fleeted with drear cold and greyness. Now it woke, caught the world in its grip, sent out its raving bitter winds, flung down great veils of driving sleet and snow. The trees whirling desolately showed tortured, storm-whipped limbs through a driving greyness; shooting was impossible.

The house-party settled resignedly to a long day indoors; the house was blissfully warm and comfortable.

Ralph Knox Harding went away into the storm, his duty calling him; but over his Spartan breakfast he lectured Margaret. Would she not please him—forbid cards on Sunday. Order her house differently.

"I do not play myself. If I forbid it people would only play in their own rooms," she said unhappily.

"Then do not have such people in your house," he urged. "Oh, Margaret, when we went together through those piteous houses in my parish, you had higher ideals."

"In seven different ways," remarked Roland, irritably, later on, "though the clock only points to eleven, have I been reminded of the foul folly of my youth. The man's a fanatic."

"A fanatic, whipped by baffled love. Honestly believing that no one save Ralph Knox Harding is a fit mate for your wife.'

People settled down, some to books and drowsy comfort, some to Bridge.

Roland, strolling downstairs later, heard agitated voices in the library.

Open air banishes and keeps at bay the plots of man; as warm fires and lack of exercise foster them; as puny humanity begins to assert his kingship within four walls.

Ruth Cosway and Mr Levenge were coming out of the library, and in it, her fair head bent, not unlike a sulky child who had broken something, stood big, fair Agatha.

Agatha had been meek, plastic, the hour to speak seemed ripe. The argument was the result of a plot which had failed.

Since Agatha showed open disregard for pretty toys in enamel and pearls, for fans and flowers, Levenge had been struck by inspiration. A horse, to please his lady-love. Now to Walter Levenge a horse was a beast four-legged, and with head and tail, varying according to the value. He had written to Gradly, the big dealer, for the best lady's hunter he could find—price no object. Something light and pretty, wrote the unwary novice.

Roland had been asked for a stable. Wires had flashed, and that morning, a hooded, swaddled mare had arrived, to walk shivering through the storm.

"Agatha! A friend of Mr Levenge's has sent him down a horse to keep. He wants to give it to you to ride with our hounds. It's a lady's horse," announced Lady Cosway.

This bait was too tempting. A horse! Agatha had none. The Midshire field thundered past her as she watched on foot. Ruth Cosway did not believe in foolish extravagance. Better a forty-guinea ball-gown than a hunter.

"A horse—for me to ride. Oh, can we see it, mumsie?"

A shiver then at falling sleet. "Yes, Martin says we can see her at once. There is a covered way to the stables. She is called Golden Lady, and is a granddaughter of Bend d'Or. Martin says she's a beauty."

A beauty without doubt; but thoughtless and ignorant man puts "ladies' horses" in a class. A dainty thing, bright chestnut, fine limbed, with honest, gentle head; but—Agatha stood twelve stone and more; this little creature was up to about eleven.

The big girl gave one glance, her face falling.

"She's very pretty," her voice came flatly. "It's kind of you, Mr Levenge, but don't send her to me. She—isn't up to my boots, poor mite."

"Agatha, I feel sure she would carry you perfectly."

"Across three fields, mother," said Agatha, gruffly. "Who did she belong to, Mr Levenge?"

"To the Countess of Greatorex," he said crossly.

"To Sukey. Oh, yes. I've seen her ride her. She weighs about eight stone or less. And I am over twelve."

No man looks with placidity at a waste of two hundred pounds. Agatha was adamant, would not take, or ride, the little mare.

"Better begin hunting yourself," she said carelessly. "She would carry you, going quietly. I want to shove along—"

This was the commencement of the day. Now badgered, forced into a corner, Lady Agatha was standing tremulously to her guns.

"I wasn't ungracious, mother. I would break the poor little thing's back. I ride fourteen stone, I do

really. If Mr Levenge got it for me, he was a Juggins. Oh, it may be vulgar, but it's true. Why can't he let me alone? I don't want him."

"Not want him? Not want Astor House and diamonds and the Strelshy diamond?" Lady Cosway stormed at her daughter—stormed and then entreated. She had told Levenge to follow them in half an hour. He appeared nervously.

"I don't know why," began poor Agatha, who did not want to hurt anyone. "B—but—"

"Do you dislike me, Lady Agatha? Am I distasteful?" he asked.

"Oh, no," said Agatha, limply, and to herself, "Why will he talk like novels." "Oh, dear, no," she said hastily.

"I could do a great deal to make you happy," he suggested. "You shall buy your own hunters, you know. And there are a great many things."

Agatha showed signs of wavering. "Leave her to me," said her mother.

Lady Cosway abandoned storm. She showed her daughter the wickedness of throwing away her brother's chances of advancement, of getting Dick's debts paid and Harry's mortgages cleared off. Mr Levenge would pay them all with his money, so easily.

"No," said Agatha, stoutly, "I should pay them all—with myself."

Her mother said she was indelicate. Agatha sucked her finger.

"Why can't I take Tony?" the girl asked sullenly. "I don't want to be rich. Well, mother, I'll think it over." This was to gain peace.

Roland found his cousin tearful and undecided.

"It's so horrid to be made feel you're a selfish

b-brute," sobbed Agatha. "Poor old Tony can't marry me. He's only got five hundred a year."

"If he had another thousand," suggested Roland.

"Even then I'd have to run away, but I'd do it," said Agatha. "Mother says she'll take me off to Aunt Mary's in Scotland. I'll be a prisoner there—nothing else. The letters come across a causeway, and there isn't a village for miles. I shall drink vinegar and become a skeleton," burst out Agatha, despairingly. "If I wasn't a kind of health advertisement Walter Levenge wouldn't want me."

Roland sent for Tony. There was some argument —some reluctance, and then Agatha kissed him again.

Her meek avoidance of Tony during the long, dull days might have made a shrewder woman suspicious.

Another drama was approaching climax.

Foolish Lettice was growing dreamy, and convinced she must have more fun in her life. Tim Helmsley had turned sulky; twice, searching for his wife, he had found her in dim corners, sitting with Sir Mark.

"Let us be friends again in London," he whispered. "Come out to lunch with me—on Saturday. We'll do a matinée if you fancy it—or sit somewhere and talk."

Women love presents. Sir Mark knew how to give them. Boxes of sweets, flowers, enamel charms. There was always something.

The swept room was being filled again with ghosts of half-scotched desires.

Her little flat was poky. She thought of one of the big hotels at Mentone, or Monte Carlo—of sunshine and space away from smoky London.

"Why cannot we be real friends, little Madame Greenie? I've heaps of money; let me help you a little. Can't you both come to Monte for a week, as my guests, of course, right through."

Lettice suggested it eagerly. "Tim, Sir Mark has asked us abroad for Christmas—to stay with him."

Tim was painfully middle class. "I shouldn't like to, Lettice. It's taking too much from any man. People would only talk—"

"Who? We don't know so many people."

"It doesn't matter. I shouldn't dream of going. You said you'd come to Pollie's for Christmas—down in Surrey."

Pollie's pretty house was not attractive now. It was damp and cold down there—and the children were so noisy. Lettice said so irritably. "But perhaps you ought to go to her, Tim."

"And leave you alone. Scarcely, Lettice." He was too quick, this husband of hers, helped to understanding by Vera Greene's poisoned tongue.

The fancy ball had taken shape. Motors had scurried round with invitations. The ballroom was opened. Big boxes came by express from London.

Lettice had no new dress. She was putting on a long veil and a wealth of silver stars, and calling herself Dusk.

Margaret found an old brocade which fitted her, and copied one of the pictures in the gallery, that of her namesake, Margaret. Her slender body was laced into the stiff bodice; voluminous skirts stood out in rich, silvery folds; the rich, stiff stuff had defied years.

Margaret powdered her pretty hair; stood radiant to welcome her guests.

As Lettice pulled out her long grey veil, a rap came to her door. "It will be shabby," she said, looking at the flimsy stuff.

"A box, madame, just arrived."

"For me!" Paper torn off, a gleam of green—another. A dress of pale green satin, dew-spangled, short-skirted; green stockings and shoes; a coronet of dewdrops for her hair.

It fitted wonderfully; the shoes were her size; the stockings filmy joys. A card in the box. "For Madame Greenie—call your dress 'Myself.'"

It was a little too low; the skirts a little short. Had Lettice known, she was far sweeter in grey veil and wealth of silver stars, but this delighted her in its fresh newness.

"My dear, you're very fine." Tim, as Black and White, sauntered in. "You never told me you were getting a fine frock. Who made it?"

"Oh, Mrs Edwards, of course." Lettice twisted and preened.

"I hate short dresses," he said, looking at her trim ankles. "I wish you'd told me, Lettice."

She ran away.

"It was you, of course, Sir Mark. You must not be so kind."

The gay, green-clad woman thanked him shyly, almost tremulously; her eyes shining as stars; her lips scarlet. Fancy dress admitted paint and powder.

"I wanted to see you in something perfect. I stole one of your dresses, and got this made. There wasn't much time."

Powder and patches, Greek goddesses dancing with

Charles II.; Mary Stuart in the arms of Oliver Cromwell; Marie Antoinette pirouetting with a costermonger. There is a childish gaiety in dressing up. Mrs Greene was meekly quiet as Evening, all in deep grey. Lila Storme outraged country society as a Bouquet—a dress all flowers and little else. Lady Moira was a Vivandière, because she said she felt obliged to wear scarlet shoes and stockings.

Agatha was an inappropriate Rosebud—all in soft pink; and Levenge a quite magnificent Cæsar Borgia. Tony capered as Costermonger, and said he wanted flowers on his barrow. He was in radiant spirits.

The master of the house dressed as ill-fated, handsome Monmouth.

How splendid his home was, he thought, almost wistfully, and how Margaret loved it. If it were smaller, if there was not so much to do on farm and village, absorbing all his income.

"Roland looks as if he had the toothache," said Lady Grace to Paul. "He's got that funny air of coming dentist about him. And he's had it for two days. Is there anything wrong, do you think, Mr Hesling, or is it mental indigestion from too much happiness?"

"It was something one of the strangers said on Thursday. They travelled out with his late wife. And her name always upsets him."

"Wilt dance with me, fair lady?" Monmouth bowed before "my ladye Margarett."

"Tread a measure, my lord duke." Margaret was gayer than usual to-night, less dignified, happy in her array of mumming guests. "Come, sir," she laughed and shook her fair, powdered head. "Do you know, your grace," she said, "I shall be quite glad to be

alone again, and sit quietly over our Bridge, now that we've dear mother here to revoke freely. But it's been a great success, Roland. A party worthy of Lyme Regis. Your ancestors could not scoff at this gown. Isn't it wonderful it's fitting me, Roland? " She had pulled out the sheeny skirts, and started. There was a stain on them, hidden by the folds. The rusty stain of blood.

" Oh-h! " she cried. " Oh, Roland. See, there's another on the bodice. Why did I put it on? It's ominous—horrible."

The dress worn perhaps when the men had first quarrelled, or, worse still, upon the night when the old time Margarett had disappeared. The skeleton had been found with only a few rags about it.

" Blood," she said again. " Whose, Roland? Sir Roland's or the Italian man's? Oh, it's too horrible."

" Or the prosaic pricking of a finger," he said lightly, " when my lady's picture was being painted."

The band wailed out its sensuous waltz music. Priests and kings and soldiers whirled incongruously across the parquet floor. Roland grew tired of dancing, slipped to a corner, and sat down in an alcove where he could smoke and see the gay crowd whirl past.

" She went ashore at Las Palmas." He could not get the words out of his mind. He must send a man out; have the coffin opened. Why, the evidence was explicit. The man who owned the house in Durban had given his frankly. Yes, this was Violet Mainwaring who had come out on the *Evening Star*. The jewels in her room had been identified as some Roland had given her, and were not valuable enough to sell. They were returned to him. A charm of amethyst violets.

A couple of enamel toys. A little watch, violet enamel set with tiny diamonds. He remembered them all.

Then why worry? Why weary his brain and offend the gifts the gods had given him?

He strolled away into the library. Two people in the dim light there got up, talking with elaborate carelessness.

"Silly idiots," said Roland, gruffly. "I like Tim Helmsley too, and Sir Mark's a gatherer of scalps." A murmur of voices further on made him smile. "More idiots," he said resignedly, and opened the hidden door.

"Agatha, Cæsar Borgia is getting his dagger ready. You come out of that and go and scratch him. Your mother is asking for you feverishly."

Big Agatha moved drearily; her face grew dull and frightened.

"They'll make me marry him some day," she said. "I have no real resisting power. I shall give in."

A great flitting next day. Motors playing varieties of sirens; prim maids carrying dressing-bags; packing of the big luggage-van. Endless thank yous, and arrangements for future meetings.

Then at last, peace. The emptiness of accomplishment; the dregs of the much stirred entertainment settling in the glass of time.

"I wish little Lettice Helmsley had not met Sir Mark again." Lady Grace settled herself to her cigarette. "The woman takes life too seriously. She cannot swim with her toes on the ground, but wants to go flopping and drowning in really deep water. There will be trouble with her yet."

"Trouble." Margaret looked up. "If I thought so, I'd speak to her."

"She is older than you are, Margaret, and other people's affairs are distressingly thorny hedges to jump into. Mr Hesling, why do you arrive with a sheaf of accounts just at tea-time?"

"So that they may be digested before dinner, your ladyship. Roland, come and pay your month's bills."

Roland eyed them dubiously. He would need double his income to keep this big house going. He rang for Mrs Hendricks.

The old lady sniffed as she read the scores. Gunter, Buzzard, Harrod's.

"Browne!" she said acidly. "A new kitchen range, Sir Roland, where none was required. A new scullery now Miss Browne wants, and milady says it's to be. You should send her packing, Sir Roland." Mrs Hendricks stroked her silk skirt. "Commissions," she said pointedly, "that's the kernel in the nut, Sir Roland. Commissions—and saving herself trouble as well."

Roland sighed and wrote a cheque. A visit from Miss Browne, who was contemptuously polite, did not cheer him.

Her ladyship had wanted everything of the best. It couldn't be done without spending. Of course she could economize, if it was wished.

He came back to the hall to find Margaret smelling a bunch of roses—winter roses—which the gardener had brought in.

"M'Kenzie wants a new orchid house, Roland, to grow those lovely mauve spiky orchids in. I told him to see about one."

"Orchid houses," said Roland, dubiously, "are very expensive things; I think we'd better not, Madge."

She was distressed, then sorry. "Oh, do they cost a lot, Roland—fifty pounds, perhaps? I'm sorry. I must not be extravagant. I'm afraid I told M'Kenzie a week ago to order one."

Roland guessed that the palatial structure of Mr M'Kenzie's ordering would run to many hundreds.

"Better ask me, dear," he said diffidently, "or ask Paul. These men love spending money. I want to stay on here, Madge, if we can. You are so fond of Lyme Regis."

"Stay on!" Margaret's face changed at the idea of leaving. "Oh, we must never go, Roland. We'll shut up all the big rooms again. Live on chops and chickens. Send Browne away. We want hunters, too—three or four more horses. We won't leave here for the winter."

Yet a little later saw them in London. One of the housemaids got a sore throat, a headache, called it a mere cold, lay in her room and said it was nothing, until the doctor pronounced it scarlet fever of a bad type.

The girl could not be moved. Another servant went down with it. Nurses were wired for. Sheets steeped in carbolic filtered the air from the maids' wing; but Roland took Margaret away at once. Gave the servants holidays—shut up Lyme Regis, until all fear of infection was gone. An army of leisurely plumbers tested the drains; the big house closed its eyes and fell to a tainted sleep.

They went to Lady Grace's house, when London was lighting its Christmas wares in a murk of fog and gloom, when the air there hung with a taste of bitter soot, and the cold was an enemy, stealing through opened doors, mouthing in its chill damp at the windows

of closed motors, working its will on ragged poverty with a cruel zest.

Roland hunted when he could, but light frosts came, making hunting uncertain, thawing to cold, black rain; then freezing again before the rain had finished falling.

It kept Roland chained in London. Margaret did not care to go abroad. She was not strong in the cold weather. She wanted to go down to the slums and work there, because Knox Harding spoke coldly to her of her new lack of zeal, and she wanted to stay with Roland, and between both found life a little difficult, and lost strength.

"Come to the Grand Concert, Margaret. It will be good."

"Oh, Roland, I am sorry. I promised to take these blankets down to Ralph, and these tins of cocoa and soup. He wants them to-day. Send them? He would say it was not the same. Loo Jones has asked to see me—she's dying."

"It's not right," said Roland's heart, yet he did not like to interfere. It was Margaret's goodness; the goodness which made that little bar between them.

He saw her off in a taxi. She would not take the motor. Then walked to the Bath Club to get some exercise. Two men were coming out as he went in. He thought he knew their faces. One was talking loudly, emphatically, with the accents of the professional bore. The man whose conversation trundles in endless, never-ceasing circles.

"Yes, curious thing, my dear fellow, wasn't it? Subject cropped up at Lady Mainwaring's." The name made Roland pause. "And to-day I—er—saw

the woman—knew I hadn't made a mistake. Saw her getting into a taxi. She gave the address, St John's Wood. Very ill she looked too. I say, shall we walk, old boy—so hard to chat driving? "

The two faded into the gloom, were blotted out and disappeared. "I came to do something—to play." Roland began to move into the warmth of the Club. Then his feet rooted again. "I saw the woman!" What woman? What did the man mean?

He went mechanically into a room and ordered tea; he felt chilled, suddenly tired, without knowing why.

"Bad day out, Mainwaring, and freezing hard again."

Sir Mark greeted him carelessly.

"It's generally bad, isn't it, now. I—" His mind, which had been clogged and befogged, leapt with a flash which seared. His cup fell, breaking against the table leg.

"I—my God!" he muttered.

"What is it, Mainwaring? Are you ill?"

Roland looked at him stupidly. He did not hear what Mark was saying.

"The woman—they said I was mistaken. It could not be. It could not." His whole being leapt into revolt, into an angry fear. The words teemed in his brain.

Sir Mark's words reached him at last. "Ill—yes—I believe I am. I got a chill, I think, to-day. I—"

He got up, leaving broken cup, untasted food. Still staring foolishly, he walked away.

"What on earth's wrong with him?" Sir Mark

rang for a waiter. "What is wrong? The boy looks dazed—as if he did not know where he was. Oh," to the man, "pick up that cup. Sir Roland is ill. I'll pay for his tea."

Blindly, uncertainly, Roland went out into the fog. Sometimes he stopped his whirl of thought with a jerk. He was mad. It was only a few chance words. But—

"St John's Wood," he heard himself saying to a taxi driver.

"Any street, sir?"

"No—St John's Wood—anywhere."

Through the stinging gloom, across Oxford Street, past decorous square, on to the quieter streets.

The driver pulled up. Roland paid him. The lights were twinkling golden and misty through the biting mist. The pavement was greasy, coated with a sooty slime, already hardening in the frost.

Wide thoroughfares, with endless rows of dingy houses, standing far back from the road; narrow roads with meaner houses. And in all lights gleaming above the doorways, glows of mellow light inside drawn blinds, flash of leaping flames.

Homes, dingy as they were. Warm little worlds behind their walls.

Roland's mind gave one of its sudden jumps. What had he come to find? Why was he standing here in the cold fog, looking at rows of houses? The lights would be on at Lancaster Gate, the fires burning brightly. Margaret would be going to dress. Resting for half an hour in soft, white wrapper. Her room, their room, was lighted by rose-petalled shades, curtains and coverings rose-flowered. It was all bright, yet soft, warm. He loved to come into it to see his wife there.

What was he doing here? He had gone mad suddenly. In sudden relief he turned; he heard his boot heel crunch where it was freezing to the pavement.

Margaret was waiting. Already he felt the warmth of the house, saw the bright, soft roses; they were dining in to-night, playing Bridge. Margaret would be—

"Twenty-eight," I said, "twenty-eight, you blighter." This with a hoarse laugh. "There, don't tweak round that blessed clock machine. Go easy, it's four bob. Oh, I know I kept you waitin'. Here, have a cigarette."

Margaret was waiting. Roland began to walk on foolishly, his mouth slack, his eyes set dully, fish-like in their stare. But that voice—oh, God of Heaven, that voice. It was not true—he was dreaming. No merciful power could torture man like this.

"Here, there's five bob, my boy; keep warm." A racking fit of coughing; the woman was crossing the greasy pavement just by him, opening the gate of one of the houses which stood far back.

"Lord! what a filthy night," she growled. "Why —Blessed Heaven—Roland!"

Shriek and cough came together in a half hideous smother.

It was not true. It was not true. Dumbly he held out his hands, shrinking as from a blow. Margaret was waiting.

"It's time to dress," he said foolishly. "And I —I must go home now—"

Home—God! he had no home. He woke to the pain which stabs and sears and even kills. He woke to rave against this cruel juggling with his life. Fate

had taken him in her great hands, picked him up to lay him in a garden of happiness, merely to lift him again and crush him, beat out his wings, bruise out his heart for her wanton amusement.

"You—you!" he whispered. "You—you are dead."

"Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord! Me?" She was put out—looking half frightened. "Here—who told you —oh, damn it—isn't London big enough for us both?"

"They told me you were dead," he said stupidly.

"Dead—I will be soon, if I stay here. Come in then, if we must talk this out. Come in—I'm alone."

He found himself following her down the greasy path, watching her put her key in the door. The hall was tawdry, all done in stripes of red and gold, with dusty everlastings stuck in tall pots.

"Here—come in here." She opened a door, switched on the lights; the room was stuffily warm, untidy, but well furnished. A trim maid came to the door.

"Gertrude!" Violet coughed again. "Here, get me a whisky-and-soda, will you? I can't talk for coughing." She stood silent, and Roland watched the maid bring in the tray, set for one.

"You!" he said then, white-lipped. "Oh, Heaven, it isn't true."

"Hssh! Not so loud there. I never meant to cast up again, not to you. There, sit down—don't faint—man—don't."

He heard the vulgar, high-pitched voice through a mist of pain; the voice which had offended him so often, raging at him when he thwarted her—tuning itself to a softer note when she tried to make him forget the rages by the one atonement she knew of.

Violet alive! He sat looking at her. She had aged—grown worn and thin, but the paint was washed from her cheeks; a thin film of powder was all that hid her dry, unhealthy skin; her dress was quieter. There were signs upon her of a quondam respectability. His wife! Then—what was Margaret? He sprang to his feet with a hoarse cry of pain. How could he tell Margaret? How go to her and say, I have a wife alive, you are— To have brought disgrace on that pure face; to have men turn to look at her.

Divorce—there must be that now, and then a new marriage; but the law moves slowly. What of the crawling months which Margaret must wait through?

"It can't be. It's not," he raged, flinging the puny fury of his being against the might of fate; beating at the iron wall until his senses reeled and fell back stunned by their own fury.

Ting! A foolish clock on the white mantelshelf struck the half-hour shrilly. Half-past six. He must get away—quickly.

"Drink this." Violet pushed a glass towards him. "Pull yourself together, man. Rage won't help you. I'm here—all square."

It struck him again then that she was sorry as he was, that there was no joy to her in his downfall.

"How was it?" he muttered, as the strong drink braced him. "How was it?"

"Oh, a blooming plot," she said angrily. "A nice affair, I tell you. I sailed on the *Evening Star*, with another girl, Gert Stacey. We were going out to a couple of pals in Jo-burgh, to do ourselves proud there. But we were quite O.K. on the ship. I had most of your money with me, a lot of jewels. And I wasn't two days out when I took sick. Brain fever,

I believe it was, or typhus, God knows! I don't remember. Anyhow, I was put ashore at Las Palmas to die there, and before she left me my lady Gert, stripped me of all the money, every jewel, and went off alone.

"She must have cabled to our pals some lie or other, and stayed at Cape Town herself, taking my name. She was rarely pretty and picked up someone quickly. I've found out that since, through a friend out there. She died—as Violet Mainwaring, with all my belongings with her. The chap she was with wouldn't have known. Likely he was proud of her position."

"And you?" he said. He was tired, very tired. It was all such a bitter, hopeless muddle. The overzealous inquiry office, tracing the name and no more; his too eager acceptance of his freedom.

"Well, I"— she looked at him furtively—"I nearly died, and woke up penniless, or near it, but I had a few pounds sewn away in an old bag that Gert left me there. Enough to get out on. And there at Las Palmas I met a fellow, Frank Greening. He's a traveller for a big firm—goes to Russia, Germany, everywhere; and he offered to marry me, taking all I said as gospel. I was tired of fooling, Roland. It was a house—a home—until the cough rakes me off. So when I saw your fine marriage—heard that I was dead—I let it rest. I was no more anxious to meet you than you are to see me. Straight, my boy, I wasn't! I'm happy here."

"And now?" he said hoarsely.

"Now, Greening's away. Gone to Berlin and Vienna. Won't be back for a week. That's all," she said coolly. "We can hold our tongues, I reckon."

"All?" He swayed in his misery. "All! And I must go back. Tell Margaret that she is not my wife. That I'm not married to her. That she must wait for a divorce. She, who dreads scandal. She is so good, I am half afraid of her—I must go—tell her now."

The pain was stabbing him. A thing alive. It was a nightmare, a foul dream. The small, bright room, tawdry, yet comfortable, the reek of the heavy scent Violet used, her haggard, ravaged face, pretty, despite its thinness. Her common, high-pitched voice hurrying out her story.

"Tell her, now. Don't you be such a—something—fool," screamed Violet, coarsely.

She lit a cheap cigarette, coughing as she smoked.

"Look here, Roland, I haven't got three months to live. One lung gone, and t'other on the move. Watch me down this time and make some excuse to this fine lady of yours—a flaw in the register—a wrong hour—anything. Don't you be an idiot and bust the whole show up."

Not tell—wait for the death which had set seal upon this woman. Hope chased the first hopelessness of his despair.

"If she knew," he said. "I dare not do that to Margaret—my Margaret."

"Lord! how you love her!" Violet shrugged her thin shoulders. "You never cared a blow for me, Roland. P'raps if you had"—something saddened her face—the nearness of death was softening her, making her tolerant. "I'm sorry for you. Sorry I was ever there," she said sharply.

"I believe you are, Violet," he answered, almost gratefully.

"You are right gone on this wife of yours?"

"I love her better than my life," he said simply, using old, trite words, which rang with the tragedy of truth.

"Lordy! It's a queer thing—this love," Violet coughed. "This Greening here—he's short, fat, dull—and—he cares like that—for me. Will that make you go slow, Roland—keep you from messing at divorce? The little fool believes in me. A scandal would half kill him. Look, he's no beauty, but he keeps me comfortable, snug—quiet for the first time in my life." She picked up a photograph. One of a common ,flat-nosed, commonplace man, a curled moustache twisted up to show a kind mouth.

"Thinks it's military," gasped Violet, half sadly; "thinks the twist's like Kaiser Billhelm's out there. Oh, Lordy!"

The clock chimed again—half-past seven now.

"So keep a still mouth." Violet got up. "It's your one chance. I won't trouble you long. Sakes! you look bad, I tell you."

"I—you'll write to me!" he said. "Or no—shall I—?"

"You can come along to see me, when Greening's away. It's often. I'll tell him a cousin called."

"And"—he touched his pocket—"money, Violet. You're ill."

"I could always do with a bit." Her old nature peeped out now. "That rotten Gert took all my bits of sparklers from me. I like a shine about my neck."

Gasping, with death close to her, she wanted jewels.

"I'll send you some," he said. "And here"—he put some notes on the table—"get yourself all you want."

"You were always a sight too good for me," she said hoarsely, touched now. "And, what a row I kicked up at the Empire. I'm—sorry, Roland."

"Never mind." He could not be angry with this dying thing, who faced death with a choking joke and laugh. This piece of flotsam who had drifted to a haven at the end of her days. Who had committed bigamy with cheery carelessness to get there.

He went into the hall, looked up the narrow stairs. It was one of the thousand of London houses, climbing steeply from landing to landing, stuffy in summer, cold in winter, but a home!

The chill air drove at him with a rush of fog. Penetrating, bitter cold, soot-laden, lung-reaching, such as London revels in. Out in the country it was freezing under a starry sky, with crisp, cold air, and the clean briskness to make up for the cold; but here the sooty fog fell as a pall over the vast sky.

A taxi shot across the street. He hailed it mechanically.

"Where to, sir?" Roland had given no address.

"Oh, home," he said dully. "Oh, of course," and gave the name of the house.

"Had a shade more than's good for him," said the chauffeur, as he started. "Looks fairly dazed, he does."

Home. Back, scarcely knowing what to do or say, to the woman he had married.

A thin, dark figure walking very fast came up a side street and stopped with a start.

"Sir Roland—here—so late," he muttered. The clergyman looked at Roland's lined face. "God deal with him if he is doing wrong to Margaret," he muttered fervently.

CHAPTER XI

HOME! It was not far; to drive through a mist of pain, blurred, indistinct, yet throbbingly intense—the click of the motor made words—sang to him: "You have two wives. What have you made of Margaret? What have you made of Margaret? What have—"

He would go mad if it did not stop. He took out a cigarette and lighted it; the striking of the match, the drawing the little cylinder until it glowed, making a second's respite. Then he held it dully, letting it smoke to an untasted end.

"What — have — you — done — to — Margaret?" Lights flared out of the gloom, crossing and darting, and bearing down upon him, monstrous and threatening, then slipping past.

If one struck into him. If there was a splintering crash—oblivion—a merciful release. Margaret would never know. But if she were to learn—and dead, he would have no power to right her—to leave her with this stain upon her name. The fear of the coming lights made him sit up nervously, teeth set, dreading each swerve and dash.

The cab stopped; the big houses loomed above him. Mechanically he got out, paid, walked up the ash-strewn steps, let himself in.

"I am late, Bateson." The butler was in the hall sorting the evening post.

"Yes, Sir Roland. Her ladyship expected a message from you."

Up the thickly-carpeted stairs, past the drawing-room to his own rooms. Softly lighted; blazing fires in them. His man waited for him, with his dress clothes ready.

His little world here knew nothing. Moved without thought of that upheaval of his life. Violet was alive. Alive! "Smoking-suit or dinner-coat, Sir Roland?"

"The dinner-coat, Martin. Lord Hill is dining?"

"Oh, Roland. How late you are."

Margaret's voice. He had dreaded and yet longed for it. She was dressed, standing by her fire. He opened the door, looking in as a lost soul looks at Paradise. The big room, handsomely furnished, Margaret's things about it her maid gathering them up. Her white, warm dressing-gown; her little soft slippers; the big flagon of lavender-water on a table. Margaret herself in deep blue velvet, her golden hair framing her gentle face.

"I was kept, Margaret, I am sorry." He could hear his own voice coming jerkily, mechanically, yet he supposed naturally, for she nodded with a smile.

"Dress quickly then—we shall be late, and I know there is a soufflét; think of the cook. I'll wait for you. You can go, Susan."

Some women's rooms are like them, taking individuality from their owners. Margaret's was. It was not overcrowded; was reposeful; its tints purely soft. How he had loved to see her golden hair in its thick, soft plaits as she lay in the big bed, her face pressed into the down pillows. She was more girlish then, more human and less saint. And even then as

he came across to kiss her he had felt unworthy. And now—he had no right in this room. It was an outrage to go in.

He might have poured out his story to some other woman, felt his burden, shared, grow light. Whispered that in true loving there can be no sin; that they must wait and make no sign; but, to Margaret—he knew her views, exaggerated them. He *could* not see her turn from him; hear her cry out in horror—

"I have been living with you as your wife. I, who had no right to. What am I? How can I face the world? What can I do? What shall I do? What will mother say?"

No, he must keep it to himself. Bear his own sorrow; but in the after days when he could tell her, he would have one argument. *After* I knew, I did my best.

"Ready, dear?" The sweet voice rang softly through the half-closed doors.

"Yes, Margaret." How was it that his voice came naturally, that she did not suspect? His feet dragged heavily; he stopped at the door of Margaret's room.

He had always gone in to kiss her before they went down; to whisper how sweet she was; how he thanked Heaven for his wife. To-night he stood, and saw her face droop a little, as if she thought he had forgotten.

"Come, then." She joined him at the door. Slim and stately in her trailing velvet, the crown of marguerites on her fair hair.

"I wish that we were back at Lyme Regis, Roland. I am tired of London. I love the country."

Fresh reason for silence. If he spoke, Margaret would lose the house she loved so much; with all her plans for a new pleasaunce by her boudoir windows, her schemes for altering this room or that.

"You're not well, Roland," she said, turning to look at him. "You look tired."

"I got a chill," he said hoarsely. "That was all, Margaret."

"My dears, you are twenty minutes late, and I have ordered a cheese soufflét, which will be flat ruin, and Lord Hill has passed the stage of appetite and got to that of despair; and what happened to you, Roland?"

Mother-in-law's merry, foolish chatter—unchanged—Hill's kind old face rising as if from a mist—through the fog of unreality and pain. It hurt to find the world swinging on without a quiver in its balance.

Dinner was a meal of sawdust, tasteless, dry, unending. Soup, sole, soufflét, turkey. Roland took some and turned them over on his plate; even ate a little, without tasting anything.

He was swimming in a black sea, under a dim fog, unable to land. He would never, he thought, see light again. The pain was worse because through it he must keep his senses, answer sensibly, keep his attention fixed, so as to do so.

Sometimes it wandered, to be dragged back with a jerk.

"Poor thing, poor thing," he heard Margaret say. "It seems too cruel." She was alluding to a case on at the moment—that of a woman divorced by trumped-up evidence, and everyone knew, yet could do nothing.

"She has no name—she is no one." Margaret spoke pitifully. "I am going to see her to-morrow, poor girl. All because this man wants to marry again. I hate scandals."

"You would not like to find yourself in the courts, then, Lady Mainwaring?"

"I should die of it." Margaret shuddered. "To wrestle with some quick-tongued barrister for your character. To have hideous questions asked. I could not bear to be stared at," she said decisively.

"Well, in that way, you are not likely to be troubled," laughed Hill.

"She could not bear to be stared at." Roland took a drink feverishly. "And if this were known, every head in London would turn to watch her."

"Grace! Look there. Lady Mainwaring! Oh, she isn't really, of course. Married for months, and the first wife cast up. Frank, look! Margaret Mainwaring, poor thing. How dreadful! Evelyn! there's Lady Mainwaring. Stuck-up thing she was; just serve her right. Pride takes falls." All this for his "rare, pale Margaret."

Above all things, therefore,—silence—the scandal guarded until there was power to mend it.

"Some women rather like it." Lady Grace mourned for the inverted soufflé, its puff sunken as a maelstrom in the centre. "They will have sensation at any price. If Mrs Mayfair Jones cannot be undergoing an operation for appendicitis with a daily bulletin in the *Morning Post*, then she gets into a Society case, and at least gives evidence, if she is not the chief actor. They say Nelly Midshire went off with Jack Henside simply because she had only one line about her at Ascot instead of two. She had to bring herself into notice somehow."

"I wonder if she laid herself under the wheels of the taxi for the same reason a year later," said Hill, thoughtfully. "And nearly got her back broken too."

"It made people remember her," said Lady Grace.

"I saw her yesterday, looking quite lovely, and glaring, at the Savoy, at Midshire's new wife. Dreadfully mixed, wasn't it, with only two tables between them. And they both look *filet de bœuf*. I remember noticing that."

Roland had pressed his tumbler so closely that it cracked and split. Violet was always fond of restaurants, of their show and glitter, their bands and deft waiters. What if she were tempted to come to one to dine or lunch, and there were but two tables between her and Margaret. Wife—and—woman who was no wife. Oh, out upon the law which binds and holds to a mad contract. Enter—with a clash of music—with gleam of satin and white fog of chiffon—with smiles and flower-strewn path—enter so—close eyes to the too dark portals which lead *Out*. For one is draped in black across a coffin's ominous outline, and across it read—Death; and one has a deep crimson curtain, with lights beyond, and over it written in smaller letters is—Disgrace.

Caged — bound — hemmed around. A bigamist. Yet sitting here at his own table with people talking lightly, carelessly.

Weak brains may snap and fail. Strong men endure and suffer agony.

Roland's lips closed doggedly. He must wait—watch—pray—until the hour came when he could tell Margaret, and that, though it would be the hour of his release—he dreaded. It would make a greater gulf; make him deeper sinner—bring the muds of his past life about her white soul.

Endless courses. Coffee—black and strong and tasteless as English coffee is prone to be. Liqueurs, dessert. Cigarettes—through the smoke haze, curling

round the red-shaded lights, he looked at Margaret; she smoked quietly, making it seem an every-day thing, with no shade of fastness in it.

Then Bridge table was set ready. With every nerve quivering, Roland must set himself to count hearts and diamonds, to measure the value of a hand, to play with some skill. He hated the pieces of painted pasteboard, the light falling of the cards, the little snap as a trick was gathered; the endless arguments as to mistakes of judgment.

What did it matter? What did it matter? He clutched at his slipping self-possession, felt his raw nerves ache and jar.

"Mr Knox Harding, my lady."

Wrapped in thick ulster, frost rime clinging to him, Knox Harding strode into the warm room. He looked tired, worn out; his face was grey and weary.

"Drink—no? But—if there is some tea ready—I am perished. It is a bitter night."

Not in there, by the bright fire in the soft, clear light. The man seemed part of another world. An offence to the luxurious room. The tray of sandwiches and drinks ready for those who had dined so recently —the two women's rich dresses shimmering, their pretty jewels flashing.

"I had a call," he said, "from an old parishioner, and I've been there until now, fighting for him."

"Successfully, I hope," Roland said, mechanically.

"No—he died an hour ago. In a room where there had been no fire for a week, with old newspapers as blankets, with a little weak tea to fight pleurisy with. I was too late to help."

"No fire—on such a night." It was horrible to drag these things before them.

Tea was brought in, steaming. The clergyman drank it thirstily, ate a few sandwiches. When we are in trouble we see more clearly. Roland, watching him, saw the good below the fanatic; the man worked, let his nature be what it might. If repression, a longing for what he could never have, made him bitter, perhaps he was not so much to blame.

"And Elsa?" Margaret had just dealt. She picked up a splendid hand, looking at it absently. In every glance at fire and light, at velvet and jewels, she saw reproach.

"You, my one-time fellow-worker, stand aside now—there, in your pomp and comfort, it is hard to appeal to you."

"And Elsa Gotlieburg?" she said again. "I hope she is better."

"She, too, is dead," said Knox Harding, quietly. "I would not have asked you to come to-day if I had not known it was just the end."

"Oh, poor soul." Margaret grew pale and shivered. "If one could learn to cure this scourge of cancer," she said piteously.

Hill put his cards down patiently. Margaret had said no trumps; he held two aces and other things. Bathos and pathos warred in the handsome room. Roland had got as near as men get to hysterics. He wanted to fling his cards down, to shriek out at them.

Dead! Everything is dead. Hope is dead—happiness—and all because of life, because one woman is alive. So many died. Why had she lived to tumble his life about his ears?

"You must have been late for dinner." Knox Harding turned to Roland, a certain grim inquiry in

his voice. "I was hurrying out for coal and food when I saw you."

"Saw me?" said Roland, flushing scarlet.

"Yes—just getting into your cab, close to Lords—"

"Why, Roland—what took you down there?"

One lie—and once begun, where can they end? "I had to go down there to see an old friend. It was he who delayed me."

Roland heard how steady his own voice was.

"Who, Roland?" Margaret fidgeted with her cards.

"A man called Darcy Browne, dear."

"Oh." Margaret knew him. "I thought he lived in Cheyne Gardens. I remember. How good of you to worry about him, Roland."

Mr Harding's eyes were hard and cold as steel. He knew it to be a lie, had seen Roland falter and think. What horrible tale of the past had caught his cousin's husband? Was the man turning back to wallow, being weary of sweet meadow flowers? He meant to know.

"I must go back," he said; "it's very late. Oh, it is more than good of you, and I am very tired."

For Hill had offered his motor, now waiting at the door.

"Good-night, Margaret—if you could spare a day to hear my children practise their glee. Poor mites, they love to shriek it in twenty keys. All dreaming of tea and a bun afterwards."

"I have not got a day this week," she answered. "Next week, if you like."

"Your life is very full," he said gravely, reproach in his voice; "don't quite fill it with emptiness, Margaret. Good-night."

Roland's momentary liking for the man was dead.

He had seen the keen, suspicious glance—had felt that Margaret's cousin recognized his clumsy lie.

Why choose Lancelot Browne, still, no doubt, in Cheyne Gardens?

Why had Knox Harding seen him? In this vast London, why should he have been sent scurrying from some obscure street to meet Roland? Fate, picking up humanity in her basket, alone could make answer.

The hand was played and won. Margaret got up, smiling, laughing at her mother's dolorous face.

"Oh, mother dear, you won all last night. It's not such a tragedy."

"It was the melting frost and the deaths," said Lady Grace, peevishly. "I ought to have led my diamond through, and a spade seemed to leap out. I could only lead a spade, we'd talked of so much blackness."

"The diamond through would have saved two tricks," said Hill, gravely.

"And the game. I do wish dear Ralph wouldn't run in from newspaper beds and dreadful sorrows. One would help if one knew. Oh, the car's back for you. Good-night. I'm tired, children, good-night."

The ordeal was upon him.

"Come, Roland, I am sleepy too. It's cold a foot away from the fire." Margaret put her head against Roland's shoulder with the sure gesture of a well-loved woman, waited for the hot lips on her cheek, for his arms about her. Waited—vainly. Roland was shivering; his hand fell from her waist, his lips did not touch her.

"Yes, come to bed," he said, his voice shaking.

He heard her moving about. Then say good-night

to Susan. A little bed stood cold and narrow in the corner of his room.

"Roland," he heard her call him. He made no answer. Then a little later he opened the door. Asleep already. Her golden hair in its big plaits framing her sweet, flushed face; her lashes dark against her cheeks. Margaret! He had lain awake there to hear her soft breathing; kept sleep away that he might realize his happiness. His own, even if she was too good for him. His wife and love. He had switched the light on sometimes, bent over her with beating heart, that he might see her wake and smile at him.

And now—he must not go in. Afterwards he could explain. Now—

She turned and woke, stretching her soft, slender limbs as a sleeping child might have done, yawning.

"Why, Roland, I went to sleep. Put out the light."

He switched it off, stood in the dim firelit gloom, his head bent in his hands.

"Where are you, Roland?"

"I am not well, Margaret. I had better sleep in my own room—to-night."

She was asleep again, scarcely heard.

His lips on her cheek; lips cold and dry. The noise of a shutting door.

A man who lay awake and could not sleep for the mad pain which racked him.

It was cold in here; his bed was damp. Before morning it was easy to pretend, for he was coughing, with dead white cheeks and fever-bright eyes.

Margaret awoke, saw he was not there, came running to his room.

"Roland, you're ill. Oh, why did you stay here? Martin, Sir Roland's ill."

"It was a chill," he said. "I—would have kept you awake coughing, Margaret."

His cold hands clutched hers, holding them closely. If he could tell her. If he dared. But she was Margaret—and he must be silent. He could not bear to think of her shamed, degraded—a saint dragged from her niche.

"I shall send for Doctor Fairfax, if you are no better."

"I'll be all right, Madge." Her tenderness hurt him. How could he keep his arms away from her? His lips from hers? And yet—he owed it to her. Men, made of stern stuff, catch certain ideals and hold them caged, despite advice or reason. He knew that he must suffer, accepted the certainty doggedly, almost forgetting that he must make Margaret suffer too, and without doubt raise her suspicions.

He came down to an unwanted breakfast. The frost held London. Clouds of fog eddied and swirled outside the windows; icicles dripped as the roofs heated; the cold was bitter, almost cruelly intense.

"Cold," said Lady Grace, wrathfully, "means twenty minutes extra at one's dressing-table. A blue nose takes so much more careful covering than a white one, and I know a purple shade comes through, no matter what one does."

"Mother dear, one would think you were heavily enamelled, instead of merely drawing our attentions to your perfect complexion."

Grace Knox laughed gaily. Time had left her fine, clear skin almost unwrinkled, a light coating of powder was all it needed.

"Where are you going to, Margaret?"

Margaret's hat was on; her furs lay ready.

"I am going down to Whitechapel, Roland. Taking some food for poor people there, but not staying. Ralph asked me to; he is here now. Roland, cannot we soon go home? I have so much to do there."

"A note by express, Sir Roland." The butler handed it to him.

Roland grew white; his lips opened in fear. He knew the writing. Was Violet going to send letters to him? Letters which might be opened. There was something in the note. A little charm, which he wore on his watch-chain, a tiny white enamel daisy.

"You dropped this last night, and may be looking for it. I'm coughing my soul out. Come to see me. I mayn't last the week if this hang fog goes on.—V."

"Oh, your picture of me,"—Margaret used to call the daisy by this name. "Where did you drop it, Roland? Why, here's Ralph come to fetch me."

"I must have dropped it at the Club," he said. But the note was in his hand; the mauve, violet-scented paper; the scrawling purple V across the flap of the envelope; the heavy scent drifted through the room.

Ralph Knox Harding saw and smelt. Roland could see the man's thin nose wrinkle, and the sudden blaze of wrath in the cold eyes.

He put the note hurriedly into his pocket, reddening angrily. If they only knew.

The taxi purred away into the swirling gloom. Roland ordered his car. Margaret would not take the motors down to the East End.

As they hummed up past the gloomy frost-bound park, Roland fidgeted, grew irritable.

He must get back to Lyme Regis, away from London. Knox Harding was preaching to Margaret now. She was too good to need this dipping into the black poverty of the slums. There was infection there, almost danger. He was afraid of everything to-day.

"Stop at Blondell & Mayhams." The car threaded its way down Bond Street. Lamps were lighted all over London, fighting the swirling gloom. Each breath of air was soot-tainted, bitterly cold.

"You can go home, Graham." Roland went slowly into the lighted shop, with its long glass counters, its jewels winking against the glow of the electric bulbs.

A small, dark man detached himself, seeing Roland. "Anything this morning, Sir Roland? We've just got a string of pearls to sell, wonderfully matched."

He held the case in his hands, laid the string out on a length of purple velvet. Milky, exquisitely lovely, the sea jewels lay in their purity.

"Lady Mainwaring said she would like to change her string some time," cooed the salesman.

Roland flushed. Fool to have come to this shop, where they knew him and Margaret, instead of to a strange place.

"Not pearls to-day, Mr Blondell." He steadied his voice with an effort. "A little present. Something showy—not expensive."

"Oh." Mr Blondell lost interest. "Some wedding present, Sir Roland? H'm. How would this do?"

A necklace of blue enamel picked out with tiny diamonds. Another of dark enamel and pearls.

Roland shook his head. He wanted something to flash and shine, something inferior and yet showy.

No — no — then this — this— The counter was heaped with a mass of cases, flicked deftly open, showing the jewels inside. Brooches, charms, bracelets, pendants.

This might do. Roland picked up a brooch set with rubies—a heavy thing with little tassels of pearls.

"The—er—person I want something for likes showy things, something to glitter, and I cannot afford a big price."

"What a nice day to get a present on." A smooth little voice made Roland jump. His nerves were on edge. "I've come on the same errand, for the Delaunay girl—but I want something in silver, and thin at that."

Had she heard? Roland flushed and muttered something. "I'll take this." He snatched up the ruby brooch, not even asking the price.

Would they wrap it up, enclose his card? Mr Blondell still moved the pearls so as to catch Roland's eye. No customer had escaped him until the shop-door closed.

"No—I"—Roland pulled the scented letter out, then crumpled it up hastily; the scent of violets was so strong. "I'll take it, as it is."

"Not a wedding present then?" Mrs Greene nodded her small head. What a heavy, tasteless thing. Who was the "person" who wanted showy things?

Chattering, she kept Roland turning over the heaps of jewels, yearning for a small enamel charm, half hoping he might give it to her. Vera Greene never lost a chance of a present. "How is dear Margaret? I have not seen her for an age; not since the day before yesterday. She is keeping fit, I trust?"

This with silky meaning. "Ah, there is Sir Mark. The world is buying jewels to-day, Mr Blondell."

Sir Mark walked quickly to the counter, seeing neither of them. "Have you got my things ready? The clasp of the necklace, you remember, was unsafe."

"Yes, sir, here." The jeweller cannot resist a flash of his wares. The case snapped open, showing a curiously barbaric chain of heavy turquoises, and a pendant of diamonds set round a lump of blue.

"Oh, shut it up, paper it." Sir Mark was irritable.

A present for Mrs Helmsley. Vera Greene's nose wrinkled. "That case is just a little too—you know—Sir Roland."

"I can't find you anything else, Sir Roland? Not tempt you with the pearls?"

"No, thank you." Roland hurried off. He walked to a shop near Charing Cross where he had seen glittering cheap things in the windows, found what he wanted there, and drove to his Club.

He made the parcel up himself; sealed it.

Mrs Greene, having bought a pair of bonbon dishes, went discreetly to her waiting car, one lent for the day. Vera Greene knew how to extract loans.

"Who was that letter from?" she whispered. "Scented, on coloured note-paper. And such scent, pah! Such stuff!"

Before evening a dozen people knew that Sir Roland had been looking for showy jewels, and would not leave the address at Blondell's.

"He's met some of his old friends," said Mrs Greene, softly. "My dears, they are very hard to escape from."

Roland sent for a messenger boy. Gave him the package. He was to leave the parcel. Not wait for any answer. That was all.

How the day dragged, wearily; each hour endless. So each day would drag, until he was released. He counted the crawling minutes. It was half-past twelve. Only that—not twenty-four hours as yet since he had known. And Violet might live for a year—for two. He thought that he must go away somewhere. Hide until he was really free. And yet he dared not leave.

They were lunching at the Carlton. Mrs Martin had a party there; going on to play Bridge.

The Palm Court was deliciously warm, a sense of comfort in it.

Roland had given half a crown to the loafer who opened the cab-door before the hall-porter could reach him. The man's face was blue and pinched. His fluttering rags were fastened with a couple of great brass pins.

"Gawd bless your lordship." The raucous voice reeked of gin, but the man was cold. Let him go to his gin paradise if he must; he would forget the fog there.

Mrs Martin had gathered a huge party. She could afford to entertain. Ruby Dundaire, the beauty, was radiant. Her engagement was announced. The flashing eyes, the high colour and red lips had captured Halsmere Ellworthy, and Ruby would some day be a countess. He was a dull, heavy youth, his neck bulging from his collar; he was also addicted to too much champagne; but Ruby Dundaire was absolutely happy, absolutely contented.

There was little Lady Moira Moore, breaking her

mother's heart, about to fling herself away on a mere nobody—Captain Elliot Lestrange—a big, clean-limbed, clean-living young fellow, with a perfect seat on a horse, and distant prospects from a healthy aunt —but what a match!

They were there to-day, and Lady Moira was absolutely proud of herself.

Ruby's high voice talked of Halsmere, of Ellworthy Court, of her new motors and her hunters—she aired a great diamond ring, and pushed back her furs to show her new emerald pendant.

"What car are you buying, Moira? I'm to choose my own."

"I'm having a donkey car," said Lady Moira, demurely. "We think a donkey might live on the scraps of our bread and water."

"Dear Moira, how silly you are!"

"I almost think I'm not then." The soft, Irish voice had a gay laugh in it.

Lord Ellworthy was getting flushed over his fifth glass of champagne, his sallow tint deepening to a muddy crimson. He was growing foolishly witty, with a wit which would have suited Romano's better than the Savoy.

He talked freely of when the old man would snuff out, and then he'd have some fun.

"When are you going to be married, Moira?" someone asked.

"As soon as ever we can," said Moira, emphatically, blushing at the laughter which followed.

"I'll give you something lovely, Moira." Mrs Martin had kindly instincts. "Some oats for the donkey, I think."

"You're very quiet, Sir Roland." Mrs Greene's

sharp nose poked forward, her soft voice rang across a silence. "I hope your present was appreciated."

"I hope so." He flashed a glance at Margaret, hoping she had not heard. Could he not stir without everyone talking of it?

She had; she looked at him with careless curiosity. So far they had had no secrets from each other. "What present?" she said.

"There's Sir Mark lunching there." Fat Mrs Martin looked at a table in a corner. "I asked him, but he was engaged. And Mrs Hillyard. How pretty she is—but she's grown thin."

Thin, and the colour on her cheeks was fixed; she wore a new turquoise necklace. Lettice was not eating; she crumbled her toast, made patterns on the tablecloths, took food, and left it untasted; but she drank thirstily, until the bubbling golden wine banished depression.

The mask of friendship had been almost stripped off. Sir Mark had waited long enough. An end to merry luncheons, to new frocks, to pretty presents; or a beginning of hidden meetings, of lies which would grow and multiply; or the old spiced drink, which has so high a froth, and grows flat so soon.

"London is hateful—impossible. Come abroad—Lettice."

"You know that I cannot." She crumbled another piece of toast.

"You can be ordered there. Let's get away to Mentone—sit in the sunshine—gamble mildly. Mrs Chantrey is going. We can all go together. Or rather, you can go with her."

"I am perfectly strong," she said.

"I've heard you cough. Go to Frank Hutton, my

cousin. Go to-day; see what he says. Come, Lettice; you want a little fun. You're tied down here—never at liberty."

The big luncheon was over. Empty coffee-cups, broken pieces of bonbons, cigarette ends littered the flower-decked table. The human tide leaves its flotsam as it recedes.

The guests grouped as they said good-bye. Ruby was going to a jeweller's to see about resetting some things; her future husband was dull and inclined to sleep.

"There's a big star I want. I'll get him to give me that," she whispered to Moira.

A drunkard—a stupid, gluttonous boy, but how proudly mother and daughter walked to the waiting car.

"We're going to a matinée, to escape the wrath of my injured mother," said Moira.

Little Lady Moira's face was alight as she put on her heavier furs. She was happy, she meant to be happy. She had chosen love instead of town and country houses, and diamonds, and sables.

The donkey would probably be a small motor, her poverty be comparative, but her mother wept and would not be comforted.

Roland and Margaret drove to Berkeley Square.

"Did you buy a present for Gracie yesterday," she asked, as they drew up the heavy fur.

"I—no," he said. "Oh, Vera Greene was chattering. I was choosing something at Blondell's. Not for myself. I would not tell her, knowing her joy in making up stories."

How glibly the lies came now. He was beginning not to stammer as he told them.

"Oh," she said quietly, yet wondering why he did

not hold her hand as they drove along. "I forgot—there was a wire for you, Roland. Paul is coming up. He wants to see you."

Paul! For a moment Roland thought of telling his friend. Then the thought died. He could not betray Margaret. Even Paul must not know that she was no man's wife, but a woman whom the hard world could point at scornfully.

"Oh, I don't quite know what it was." This in five years' time, as my ladies Betty and Sue talked. "But there was some dreadful scandal. She wasn't his wife, or something. Oh, of course, she never held up her head again—they vegetate in the country. I don't even know if the child's all right. I suppose so—it's in Debrett."

Light slaying of a woman's character. He had heard it so often.

The fog held its own, eddying in bitter drifts, lifting, falling again, wrapping London in its soot-flavoured pall. The pavements were icy, and horses slipped and struggled on the streets. The roar was muffled and yet deeper in the still air.

Lettice drove homewards. Back to South Kensington. She dined in that night.

How cold it was in their flat. The fire was half dead; the air in her bedroom made her fingers numb. She turned on the glowing gas-stove, a thing she hated.

The housekeeping books were on the table, mutely reproaching her. They had not been paid for a month. How the hateful little items mounted. The two pounds for the grocers, she had changed to drive up and buy some gloves. Now the two-pound bills had risen to eight. Butcher, milkman—it would take so much to pay them now.

If she went abroad, what a rest it would be. A great hotel, sunshine outside. Smart frocks. Lettice stopped.

Someone would have to pay for the smart frocks. And—and—the gas was warming the room; she took off her pretty cloth dress and got into a tea-gown. The new turquoise necklace lay on her table, the diamonds in it winking. It was so pretty; she loved pretty things. But—the gas ate up the air, made the room stifling. She switched it off again, opening a big flagon of Verveine, got for her from Paris, spraying herself with it, fidgeting at the things on her table. She put her presents away as a rule, hid them before Tim—or pretended they were paste toys.

"Hallo—Lettice—Lettice!"

"You, Tim." She had not heard him come in. He was home early.

"I got away to-day; let's have some tea. You were lunching out."

"Yes, with Mrs Chantrey."

He was curiously excited.

Mrs Chantrey was always available.

"Great friends you two are, but I don't see much of you now, Lettie. Never mind! The good time's coming. We must ask this woman to lunch on Sunday."

"Here, Tim. Oh, she wouldn't care for that."

"Out then. What a smell of Verbena—you love the stuff." He came towards the table. Lettice dropped her handkerchief on the necklace; she was afraid to take it up; but he saw it.

"Hallo! where did this come from, Letts? It's pretty."

"It's Mrs Chantrey's." The lie came stammeringly. "She lent it to me, just to wear."

"Oh," he held it in his hands. "Just to wear. You've got your one of pearls, Lettie, and the little one of enamel. But they're not much."

Her lips were dry. What if he took it up? Her initial was on the clasp.

"Fine turquoises," he said, "and the pendant's lovely. I say. If you like this—" He turned it over. There was a long pause. Lettice could hear her own heart beat. She took out a cigarette, lighted it, and could not make it draw.

Then the pause was finished. A voice she scarcely recognized as Tim's was speaking.

"It was nice of her to put your initial on it," he said.

"It's—it's—it's hers, as well—"

"Why bother to lie to me any more, Lettice." He turned to her, his eyes burning. "Let me have the truth now. As Mrs Chantrey did not lend you that necklace, you did not lunch with her to-day."

"She—" Lettice stammered, groping among her lies. "She—why should I lie, Tim?"

He laughed bitterly. "Why? You should know best, Lettice. Come, this room is icy." They went into the tiny drawing-room. "I've heard and not believed. I met our friend Mrs Greene last week. She stopped me to tell me how lovely you were looking at the Sugar Dragon. You were there with Sir Mark Deleraine. You had not mentioned his name to me. I thought he had come round to speak to you. Did not believe it. Lettice, what folly are you playing at?"

She began to cry softly. "None—none." She liked going out, lunching, dining. She did see Sir Mark sometimes—but he—Tim—did not care for him. She

had not talked of it. It was so dull all day, unless she went out.

"Lettice—I'll have the truth—now." His voice rang savagely. "God! I've been blind. That rose and silver dress you said you bought. He gave you that. I've wondered at your lovely clothes lately. I love you, Lettice, and I've a fancy to keep you; but men do not give pure women such presents. What's between you?"

He gripped her hands savagely, held her up, facing him.

"Nothing! Before God, Tim. Oh, let me go. He was only a kind friend—"

"Nothing as yet. You are not lying now. You were such a good little girl, Lettice. I set my life's faith on you, and now I find my earth slipping." He was talking quite queerly. "Luncheons, dinners, chiffons, a turquoise necklace—poor prices for two souls, girl, when you count them over. Lettice, I have not been blind. I have seen you slipping, slipping from me, without knowing the true cause, or by Heaven you should not have gone so far."

She was whimpering, sobbing as a frightened child.

"It's a poor game," he said, still quietly. Tim Helmsley was touching greatness as he stood there, restraining the hot anger of the male who sees another rival him, playing his hand to save his wife. From her bright, golden head to her slender feet he loved her very dearly.

"We were very happy once, Lettice," he said, "you and I. We swore a great many foolish vows besides those we gave in church. Are they all to be broken, my wife, for a few bright toys, a little fun—for aspic and mousse de jambon, instead of cold beef and salad—for

the wearing of pretty frocks and the turning of heads to look at a lovely woman. It is not good, girl, to belong to two husbands, one legal and one not, Lettice—there would be the aftermath, the inevitable ending of this first friendship—the emptiness when it was over and the opening of the next. Men seem to know the women who gamble away their beauty—they always find them doubly attractive. Girl, is it too late? "

"No, no," she told him through her tears, broken by gentleness, when anger would have made her sullen; frightened by this plain speaking; but still prating of her good intention. "He was only my friend, Tim, kind to me. It was only that—I swear."

"Poor little fool," he said gently. "Had you not some idea of going abroad, Lettice, and then—what of friendship? "

Then—it was all too clear. She had been weak once —weak again—now by his side bowed head on his hands, she saw herself.

"Never again— Oh, Tim, never again. For the future—confidence—every movement known. He must not trust her any more. She would return the necklace—the dresses— He had won money to her betting, that was all. There had been no presents of these—"

"Not actually. Yet they were gifts. Well—well." A sudden storm of anger shook him. "You, my own girl, my little sweetheart. You, Lettice, think over it. And now good-bye."

"What! " She sprang up with a scream and choked it, seeing her doom in his face.

"I shall go away, Lettice. You shall have enough to live on. I couldn't stand the mockery of life together now. Your life's your own, my girl, now; but I have warned you what you can make of it."

"No, Tim, no! I'll never be a fool again."

"That—you will find out in the days to come. The lawyers will write to you. I have finished. Good-bye."

A clicking lock, steps outside—these quiet men act quickly. No sound then.

Alone—she was alone. The girl sat stunned. An outburst of tears died away. Tim had left her; she was punished—almost too well.

Tim had left her. Rage followed her first sorrow. She had done nothing. Why should he? Now, if she did break faith, who could blame her? She *would* not be alone. She would 'phone to Sir Mark—meet him for supper. She dropped the receiver with a sigh. Would Sir Mark be so anxious to meet her now. She knew he dreaded scandal. A hundred mad schemes flashed through her aching head to burn out and leave cold ashes.

The maid was out. Wearily crying again, now, Lettice got up, gathered every little toy and jewel which Mark had given her, and packed them in a box.

She would go to her aunt, away in Devonshire, live there with her. Tim might hear of it. She would die, of course. Youth always lets its mind leap to death, and Tim—

Oh, Tim. All the schemes merging then to her great loneliness. Crouched by the dying fire, too miserable to cry. If he came back now— If she had her chance again. She remembered their meeting by the sea, the golden days of love, the bliss of certainty; the perfect joy of her quiet wedding.

Lettice Crossley had thrown herself away, her friends said, but Lettice did not think so. And now— If Tim had been angry, raged at her, but his quiet

words, so horribly true. Their naked truth was before her. Would she have come back and belonged to two men? Tim's words. It is not pretty, Lettice, for a woman to own two husbands. One legal and one not.

Then—oh, the cold misery, sitting there. The ache of despair.

The door opened.

"Is that you, Graves? I—you need not have dinner for me to-night. I am not well."

"It is not Graves. It is I—Tim. Lettice, I could not live without you. Who am I to sit up as judge. Little girl—shall we begin again?"

In his arms now, sobbing out mad happiness. Clinging to him, knowing the full worth of those arms about her, of his lips on hers.

"See, Tim—I was sending all these things back."

"Were you?" He had poked up the fire, lighted the spirit-lamp and put the kettle on. "Child, you are perished! No, Lettice, the man gambled and lost. Don't let him think that a row, coercion, made you return these. We'll think about them. Lettice, I came to-night to tell you the bad, hard days were done. My uncle James has left me a fortune—all he had. I flew back to tell you—waiting until we were cosy by the fire to do it—and found that cursed trinket. But I couldn't go—"

"Oh — oh." Life rewarded the sinner in the peculiar manner of its awards.

"We might go off for a year, Lettice. See Japan—Australia. I've always longed to. All France, Venice, Spain— Shall we get ready to-morrow?"

"Tim, I don't deserve it."

Which was true. But Lettice Helmsley was across the shoals and in harbour for her life.

Sir Mark took up the 'phone next day. "Yes—is that you? Can you lunch—to talk this trip over. What? You can't! You are too busy. Going away? Where? For a year, round the world—with a pal?" Here Mrs Helmsley made a face at her husband. "You are—what? So very very sorry you won't see me to say good-bye. Well I'm blowed," said Sir Mark, ringing off, furiously. "What on earth is up with the woman?"

Lettice Helmsley wrote a sweet farewell letter to Mrs Greene; and Sir Mark, driving opposite the lady some days later, saw a turquoise necklace of a curious pattern on her thin throat.

"Dear Lettice sent it to me," cooed Mrs Greene, seeing him stare, "as a parting gift. She has gone off to the wilds with her husband, I *believe*. She sent me such pretty little things."

Sir Mark did not enjoy his dinner.

CHAPTER XII

MARGARET watched for Roland that night. Sat late by the fire—he was dining out. Heard him come stealing up—go into his small room. But her door did not open. He did not come tiptoeing across with, "Asleep, sweetheart?"

Margaret was hurt—her pride in arms. What was it? What had happened to Roland?

She slept fitfully, got up and went to his room. He was just opening his letters.

"Roland, are you not better?"

"It's—this cough, Margaret—I—I am afraid of keeping you awake."

"I did not hear you cough in here. What a strong smell of violets."

He knew it too well. A mauve envelope addressed in scrawling writing, lay on his bed.

It was a letter of thanks for his gift.

"The shiners are top-hole. You're a brick after all, Roland. I can say they're paste."

The eider-down slipped—the horrible scented letter lay in view. He caught it up—crumpling it savagely.

"Oh!" Margaret was not a suspicious woman, but she was not a fool—this was the second scented letter she had seen. It was some echo from her husband's past and he would not tell her of it.

She stood, her loosed hair falling about her, her long, white gown clinging to her slim body.

His rare, pale Margaret. How could he ever tell

her? He must endure. Hide this horror from her, even if he lost her love.

"I fear you are not well, Roland." She went away.

Paul's quick eyes saw Margaret's pallor—Roland's uneasy air. What was amiss between these two? He thought that Roland would tell him — waited for confidence.

A box of books lay in the study. Margaret had bought some. She had a fastidious dislike to belonging to a library, to reading books which had passed through strange hands. Roland saw one title, *Florid Gold*, sprawling across a mauve cover.

"You—are not going to read that, Margaret?"

"Oh, yes," she said, "Vera Greene told me of it."

"You must not—I read it—last week. It's horrible. It treats of a subject no book should treat of, so subtly it makes it pleasant. And other scenes are coarse, brutal—too horribly realistic. Don't, Margaret, it's not fit for you."

"I'm not a child," she said quietly, staring curiously at him.

"You are, in nature." He picked the pale mauve volume up. "It would only leave a bad taste, Margaret—something nasty to think of."

"Oh, as you please," she said carelessly.

With a frown wrinkling her pretty forehead, she sat by the books, looking idly at the others.

How careful Roland was of her — hemming her about—treating her as if she were more saint than wife —putting her in a little niche above him. She fell into his mood—almost too easily. And yet—and yet—the smell of violets came fragrantly from a bunch on the polished table. She picked the purple blooms up, flinging them irritably into the fire.

Yet—she had seen two of those tinted, scented letters coming in two days.

Paul waited in vain for any confidence. "You don't look well, Roland," he said at last.

"I got a chill, old man. Nothing more."

"It's made you pretty ghastly. You ought to take something."

"The waters of Lethe," said Roland, bitterly.

"Why, Roland, what's amiss? It's not that parson fellow?"

"It's—" Roland shivered and sighed. "It's a bit of memory, Paul—the parson is all innocent. I sank too deeply ever to have married Margaret—that's all. She's far too good for me."

"Rot, my dear boy," said Paul, practically. "Margaret would be all the happier if you made something more human of her."

"God! I may yet." Roland's voice shook. What had he made her already? His mistress—a woman disgraced—a bigamist. His mind writhed in the grip of torment. No one must know. He must bear it alone.

Violet had scrawled an invitation in her letter: "Greening won't be back until Thursday. Come to see me. Come or I'll 'phone to you. My temper's bad to-day."

He must go—the thing was beginning to be a terror. He wrote a wire, then tore it up. He could not send it out by a servant. He must go himself. He threw the letter, tearing it first, on the fire, and watched it burn—one scrap falling unnoticed from the coals into the fender.

"It's pouring, Roland. Where are you going to?"

"To—send a wire," he said, meeting Margaret in the hall.

"Yourself!" she said almost sharply. "And with your cold?"

Why had he told her the truth? Why not have said he was going up to the Club for letters?

"I—am going on to the Club," he stammered. "I meant—I'll send it there."

"Oh!" she said again. "You said you would nurse that cold this morning."

"And you?" he asked unhappily.

"I am doing nothing." Her lips drooped a little. "I think Ralph may call."

The putting himself apart, with his own hands, from his wife. Lying to her—making her unhappy—leaving her with a kiss on the cheek. Yet, what was he to do? Afterwards she would thank him. To a woman of her nature, would not his kisses be an insult?

Leaden-footed, out into the bitter rain which had followed the frost—tramping through it without noticing how it soaked him. Going to Vere Street before he would send his telegram—then looking guilty—seeing a spy in every stranger.

Pausing—a letter would be safer. Wires could be repeated. He wrote one—tore that up and went into the telephone bureau.

Detective Smith, who was shadowing a noted pickpocket, strongly suspected him of being a murderer, and, being a privileged person, signed to an official and listened.

"Yes—have you got it—No—double 3 not—03. I've got it down. Yes. Is that you, Violet? Yes. Yes. I'll be with you at three."

"Only that!" said Detective Smith, contemptuously. "Jealous missus in the hoffing, then. S'welp me!"

Leaden hours dragging as hours never dragged. Wandering from room to room in the Club, flinging down half-read papers, looking with eyes which did not see at the clicking tape. Back again, unable to grip at his trouble and beat it down.

If he were away from London—it would be better. There would be something to do at Lyme Regis. And then— No—he would be so far away there. Violet was wantonly careless. A telegram might come from her—be opened. He could watch better here. In his fever of unrest he hurried over a thousand thoughts and found none to comfort him.

If Margaret would come for a long voyage, he would be free from news. But—he could not take her away and treat her coldly. Also she hated travelling.

From quiet room to quiet room—trouble dogged him. You are a rat caught in a trap. You cannot get out. Poor rat, sang voices. Then—courage, ringing out, "Go, tell Margaret. Let her help you. Play the man. Be brave."

An instant's comfort—strangled in its birth. He could not. He dared not let her know what she was. Then Cunning, leering at his elbow. "Make no difference—don't let her suspect—she will forgive you afterwards." Honour striking the whisperers down. "I must not—I have no right to degrade her. She is not my wife. Nor yet my mistress with her own consent."

Leave London himself—go away? He was afraid to go. No more tormented man in the vast city than this young baronet. Rich—just married to a lovely wife.

"There's Mainwaring. Lucky dog!" Lord Hendic, up to his eyes in debt, passed in and looked at

him enviously. "Lots of money—a charming wife—I never can please myself if I do marry, with a parcel of mortgages to settle on my blushing bride."

"You are wanted at the telephone, sir."

He heard Margaret's gentle voice, so clear and easy to hear. "Are we to wait luncheon for you, Roland? You did not say you would be out."

A moment's hesitation. If he went back he must invent an excuse to come out again. Then:

"No—I have asked someone to lunch with me here; I'm going round then to see a doctor—I'm wretchedly seedy, Margaret, unfit for company—I'll be in for tea."

"Don't be late. Remember you promised to play Bridge here with Gladys."

But her voice sounded cold and hurt. Up to two days ago he had hated to be away from her for even an hour.

"Roland is not coming in for luncheon." Margaret hung up the receiver and went in to her cousin. "Bateson, we shall not wait any longer."

"Very good, my lady."

They had been sitting in the drawing-room, but had come down to telephone. The scrap of violet-scented paper still lay in the fender, tucked in under the brass-work.

It attracted Knox Harding. He looked down at it, wrinkling his bald forehead. What did this scrap of paper remind him of? He remembered—suddenly—of the letter which had come to Roland two nights before and smelt so strongly. Stooping, looking behind him to see no one was in the room, he picked the scrap up. "To me or I'll 'phone." No more. The heavy scent still clung faintly about the notepaper.

Knox Harding lifted his pale thin face. He was hot on an evil trail. Roland Mainwaring *was* slipping back to his early follies. He was growing weary of his quiet life—his lovely wife—he was stepping from clean firm sand to the bubbling mire of the underworld. Wronging Margaret—outraging his vows before the altar. It was Knox Harding's honest reading of it. His nature, warped and twisted, beaten down to the almost fanatical religion he moulded it into, could only see one view. The man who has lived on caviare will not take readily to bread and milk—that was his theory.

Standing with the little piece of paper in his hand, he exaggerated Roland's plunge into life—the mad recklessness of his marriage. To leave Margaret for these—women of the streets. He classed them all collectively. To coin excuse and lie that he might go to see this creature who wrote in scrawling, uneducated hand on the bright mauve paper.

And if this were true? The man threw his thin face up almost ecstatically, vowing doom to the sinner—Roland should pay— His sins should find him out. He should not come from the kisses of some painted woman to the pure girl he had married. He should pay. The flames of hell, the black punishments pictured by Dante were the foundations of this man's stern religion. To sin, and suffer for it—to suffer through life in hope of reward in the quarters of mercy, the reckoning with human nature and forgiving its lapses since it was the strongest thing on earth—did not come into the narrow road Ralph Knox Harding kept his feet upon.

To sin is human, he knew that. To forgive Divine —was forgotten—the pity of religion was not with him—only the desire to lash and beat and burn souls until they trod a path as beaten as his own.

Deep in his stifled heart he loved Margaret—a wrong to her touched him as a point of steel—this handsome worldling who had stepped in and taken her from him. Was he to live a second life and go unscathed? No—not if one man who watched and waited —sap—mine—and then set the slow match on fire in the Name of God. Margaret should know if this were so.

As he put the piece of paper in the pocket of his black waistcoat, Margaret had come in to tell him that Roland was lunching out.

"He said nothing of it this morning." Margaret played with her cutlet. "I wonder why he stays away —I don't think Roland is well. He says he'll see a doctor."

"Perhaps—" Knox Harding chose his words carefully as he broke his dry toast and took some vegetables. "Perhaps Roland has met some of his—old friends—Margaret. They cling to a man, once they know him."

"His old friends!" The violet-scented letters were in her mind. "He met one two days ago. A man he has told me he disliked—a Mr Darcy Browne."

"Yes." So strange a tone that Margaret started. "He had been to see him, I understand, the night before last."

"Yes, the evening Roland was so late."

"In St John's Wood?"

Lady Grace was out. They did not sit over their unwanted luncheon, but went back to the small study and the warmth there. Across the oval table, the silver dishes of sweets, the vases of flowers, Knox Harding had watched Margaret. The room was papered in deep brown, luxuriously furnished. It made a background

for her fair hair—her pale pure skin, her soft rich dress. Clinging velvet, heavy stuffs suited her better than girlish simplicity.

All round, quiet comfort; the oiled wheels of riches; the restfulness of home. To endanger this—soil its white surface with hidden expeditions—with meetings with women who wrote in half-formed scrawl.

As yet he had no proof—but—Knox Harding went to the bookcase—turned to the shelf of Bradshaws—A.B.C.'s—Who's Who—took out the great bulk of the London Directory.

"Cheyne Gardens. His finger ran down the list of numbers—there—plainly written—Darcy Browne.

Then the man had not left his old address. It had been a quickly coined lie.

"What are you looking for, Ralph?" Margaret sat before the blazing fire, her hands clasped about her knees, her face set in thoughtful sadness.

"I—?" He lifted the book up. "For an address which I heard a mistake made about, Margaret." He stood with elbow on the mantelshelf, looking quietly down at her. "Margaret — are you absolutely happy?"

"Oh—yes," she said quickly, too quickly.

"Happier than you would have been if you had let the world slide by and lived to help others?"

"Yes, Ralph." She blushed faintly. "I should have missed living if I had not married Roland. I should never have known what it was to be fully alive. I—was never really so good, Ralph, as you thought me to be. It would have been refuge—not sanctuary—to me."

He flushed—and one hand clenched. It was hard to stand outside and hear her talk dreamily of the joys

of living. To him as if he could never understand, or want to understand. He who had cloaked his true reasons even to himself, that he might get her to marry him. And then, in time, he, too, might have known what it was to live.

"Yet—forgive me—you look tired," he said at last, in a strained voice. "Well, good-bye, Margaret, I must get away to work."

He left the directory open on the table. Margaret got up, moved by idle curiosity to look at it. It was open at Cheyne Gardens—and Darcy Browne—he had scored it with the point of a match. Then Roland had made a false excuse—she flung her head up proudly.

Mr Darcy Browne had not moved. For a moment she stood looking at the book—then her hurt flush faded. Roland would not lie—the man had moved lately. She went away quietly to change her dress for a lighter one, but the sting of suspicion rankled and would not be plucked out.

And Roland—the leaden hours had crawled away, until he could get a taxi and drive to his visit.

"Cab, sir?"

"Yes—no—I'll walk on a little." Roland had started — stammered — the hall-porter must not hear the address—the rain met him, chill and bitter, lashing at him. How foolish he was—he could give one address —then another. He came back quickly.

"Call a cab," he said, in the same hesitating way.

"To—drive to Charing Cross." The taxi purred away into the blinding rain.

Five minutes later Ralph Knox Harding was quietly asking for Roland.

"Lady Mainwaring has sent me to tell Sir Roland not to be late."

But the lips of club servants are discreet.

"Sir Roland had just driven away. He could not say where to."

"Oh, indeed! Thank you."

The thin figure went into the driving rain, struggling up the Haymarket to find a motor monster which would whirl him northwards. A taxi flashed by him as he pushed his way among the dripping crowd. He saw Roland's face under the blurred glass, he was stooping forward to light a cigarette. After that Roland huddled back, keeping his head down. London was blackly desolate, dripping people scurrying along the dirty footpaths; the wood pavement glistened with water, rain hissing from its slippery surface. No one came out who could stay in; the lighted shops looked half deserted.

Shop-land flashed by. One road was up, and the cabman was going perilously near Roland's own house. He slipped away then into broad, quiet streets, unspeakably dreary, then on to the row of houses which stood back from the road.

"Shall I wait, sir?"

"Oh, no—no." Roland paid the man quickly—hurried up the sodden path into the shelter of the porch.

The trim maid opened the door, inquired who she was to say. Fresh pitfall—Roland had never thought of this.

"Say Mr Roland," he stammered.

"And that ain't your name," said Gertrude to herself demurely as she ushered him in.

"I never heard the bell—I meant to let you in. Get tea, Gertrude."

Violet looked very ill to-day. She was dressed in some tawdry finery, the new jewels at her thin throat.

"Violet, I can't come again. I daren't," Roland shot out. "Everyone seems to watch me—and even my name—" He told her of the difficulty.

"Damn the girl! I told her I'd let you in. She ran up on purpose. Mr Roland as well as another, then."

He sat on the edge of the brocade-covered chair, uneasy, unhappy. It seemed impossible to realize that he had called this woman wife—had kissed those hard, painted lips—told her he loved her.

The thought was a wave of weary shame, smothering him.

"You see, Greening's delayed. He wrote to me. And I was so jolly sick—" She coughed again. "And then I wanted to say a decent thank you. Why, you London men are always free. No one will see you here."

"I don't know—I was seen last time." He told her quickly. "And I hate to lie, Violet. I do it badly."

"Lawdy!" she laughed. "Life's been one long lie to me—think they'll count it all, Roland—t'other side, when I was taught it in the gutter. I could always lie nicely. Mother taught me to do it for her when she found out. It was 'Yer father's supper ain't ready—I was out to tea—tell him the kitchen flue went wrong, will yer, Vi? Coax 'im. 'E'll b'lieve you if you kisses 'im.' I was a wrong un always," she said half-pitifully, half in careless bravado, "but p'raps they allow a bit for the likes of me."

"Violet, is there no chance?" he said quickly. It was terrible to hear her cough, and coolly discuss her death.

"Not one earthly. And you wouldn't like to think it neither, old boy. Bless you, I'm booked."

Gertrude brought in tea on a brass tray, where the plated teapot slid and grated—with thin milk, bought sugared cakes. She clattered the cups and Violet swore at her.

"It does me good," she said, drinking thirstily. "Have a cup, you. You're looking cheap yourself."

He sat as a man in a nightmare, sipping the hot, tasteless tea—looking at that wreck of humanity who had been his curse. How she coughed—little racking gasps which shook her, and once he saw that her handkerchief was spotted with blood. Was he a ghoul to sit there and know he wished her dead—counting the dragging hours which must give him release. It was horrible—unnatural—he would never come again—the horror of it brought its own reaction, He put down his cup, forced himself to talk. Consumptives recover, —this warm, airless room, the heavy scent, was all madness.

"Look here, Violet," his voice shook piteously, "give yourself a chance—go away abroad—I'll pay for you. Fresh air, sunshine, might work wonders still."

She looked at him as one might look at some curiosity. Her voice rang gruffly as she answered—

"You're a hang good soul, Roland, after all. If we had it all over again I'd let you be. For I was a brute those days. Bless you, no. All the sunshine in France wouldn't save me now. And I like to be warm here. Greening will break his heart, then marry again. Marry a lumpy cousin who hates me." She laughed almost gaily. "I was a rotter time back, Ro, wasn't I? Just mad thirsty for money and jewels. And not caring a blow for anything else, but I learnt a bit in the hospital at Las Palmas. There was a sister there who

used to talk a fair treat. Jest quietly, y'know—no nonsense—she made me see things when I thought I was dying. Made me see there was good in everyone, and then, thinking back, I saw what a beast I'd been to you, and how you'd tried to bear with me. I told her a lot, that sister. She made me swear off the drink too, and then when I came out, Greening taught me a bit more. I never meant to strike up against you, Roland, and spoil your show. Honest, I didn't. You haven't told that wife? " she asked. Her long speech had been punctuated by short coughs.

" I could not," he said miserably.

" She's the sort that would take it hard, I suppose. Talk a lot about disgrace and scandal. Seems to me as you meant it honest there couldn't be anything wrong. Well, so long, Roland. I won't trouble you for a bit now. Greening'll be back to-morrow."

" If—he asks about me? "

" Oh, you're a cousin of mine, Mr Roland, a traveller man. Greening thinks me a toff," she said carelessly. " Why, who's there? Gertrude, who is coming in? "

" Miss Johnson, ma'am," said Gertrude at the door.

" I told the woman to say I was out."

Roland was on his feet in a panic—scarlet—too plainly ill at ease. He had not bargained for a visitor.

A stout, lumpy girl, dowdily respectable, had come in. It gave him fresh insight into Violet's new life. She was respectable—with stout cousins and other visitors. She had found a strange little haven here.

" I came to see how you are, Violet. It's very hot in here for you."

" I like it, thank you. Must you hook it now? Oh! Miss Johnson, my cousin, Mr Roland. Give her a cup of tea before you go."

Roland was uneasy, conscious that the stout girl was staring at him, devouring the details of his dark clothes, listening open-mouthed to his voice.

People of her class expected explanations. They took nothing for granted. It was not their way—the careless ebb and flow of the wide world was not with them.

"How did you find out Violet, Mr Roland?"

"We met, by accident," he said as quietly as he could. "I had no idea of coming across her. Good-bye." He shook Violet's hot, dry hand, burnt up by fever. "Good-bye, Miss—er—Johnson."

"That's a toff," echoed in his ears as he fumbled with the door-latch. "A toff, Violet."

"He travels a lot," Violet explained.

"And how smart you are." The lumpy girl could not forgive this wife her pretty clothes, her powder and reddened lips. "Di'monds, too, no less."

"Two and eleven three," said Violet, placidly. "Bought 'em up West—I forget the place—Swan & Edgar's, I b'lieve. Cake, Ermie?"

The rain still fell steadily, the cab-stand was some way off. Roland hurried up the dreary road where the very houses seemed to crouch chilled in the dark cold.

He had to pass two side streets before he found a cab. A small grocer's shop stood close to the second turn—it was just where he had picked up the taxi before. In it, outlined against the flaring gas, a figure waited. Dark, his damp coat dripping, a soft hat shoved over his face.

A friend had promised to meet him here. Might he wait? So, for an hour and a half, watching the broad thoroughfare with fierce, hungry eyes.

And at last, reward. Someone scurrying through the rain, taller than his fellow-men—a figure Knox Harding recognized—Roland's.

He saw him jump into the cab—but heavily, as a tired man does—saw it drive away, outlined against the blurred lights of the street.

Again—down here! Knox Harding drew a sharp breath and his face was set, that of an avenger. This was almost proof. There was someone here, someone Roland came to see.

"I fear my friend has passed." He thanked the grocer courteously, strode away into the rain. The rows of houses mocked him. So many—who could say which one Roland had been to—and how was he to find out? Chance must help him—chance and Margaret's awakened suspicion—the suspicion he meant to awake himself. Forgetting that he was getting wet, he walked on down the road, looking up at the closed doors—the light streaming blue and red through the fans above them.

One opened as he passed. He stopped to look. A stout girl, opening her umbrella, was silhouetted against a light yellow glow.

"I tell you, he was a toff, Gertrude." The shrill, common voice clearly came across the stillness. "A real one. Very fine for a cousin, Gertrude. Hey! Good-night to you."

"Good-night, miss, better take a keb." The door shut. The stout girl waddled on, passing him. A mere girl of the lower middle classes, her skirts held high with one hand, the other holding the umbrella with a dexterity born of practice. Those who drive in ledousines and taxis are not skilled in the use of that vile-ribbed saver of hats.

A toff. It was nothing—might be nothing. Yet two minutes later Knox Harding rang at the door and noted the number.

"Does Mr Darcy Browne live here?" he asked.

Gertrude flung a pert eye upon his dripping coat. "No," she said curtly. "Mr Greening lives 'ere."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Knox Harding turned away. A hoarse voice called from an inner room—

"Shut that damn door, Gertrude, the draught makes me cough."

And Mrs Greening apparently; but the hoarse voice, the words used, savoured more of Piccadilly than a respectable middle-class wife.

What lie to-day? The cab moved all too swiftly for Roland. Where should he say he had been? Trying on clothes—it was safe at least.

The well-furnished hall, as he let himself in, struck him with a sense of comfort and then of loss. This was his life and yet he must jeopardize it—worse—jeopardize it for Margaret, who was waiting for him in the drawing-room.

She was in deep pink, velvet and lace—sitting talking to her friend, Gladys Raven.

How fair she looked. How cleanly thoroughbred. How quiet the women's voices were after the shrill ones he had listened to half an hour before. The big drawing-room was restful, its deep chairs, the handsome pieces of old furniture, the good china on tables and in cabinets. It was warm but not close. There was no stale scent of Ruban de Bruges—no garish satin cushion and cheap wicker chairs.

Only the perfume of the huge bunches of violets, purple, sweet, standing in silver vases, and he longed to fling them out.

"You are not late to-day, Roland."

"Oh, no. I meant to be in time. Luttrell's not here, I see."

"He's coming all right. One of the best players in London, and content to play the game as a game, and not as a cover for a gamble in high stakes."

"I thought you were coming in for luncheon, Roland."

"I meant to." His lies came more easily to-day. "But—I—had to ask a fellow to lunch—at the Club, and I had such a head too."

Tea was being made ready—their servants carrying it in. A shining mahogany table, a cloth of exquisite fineness, wrought and belaced; deep blue Worcester cups, a brown tea-pot bound with silver bands, a hissing copper kettle. The butler was arranging the plates of sandwiches, the hot buttered biscuits in their silver dishes, nestling in lace paper. He jostled one up, overturning it.

What if Margaret turned round and said "Damn the man." It made Roland almost inclined to laugh hysterically. Gertrude had been damned as she rattled her brass tray.

"Oh, here's Luttrell."

The big man strode in cheerily. "A blessed afternoon to play Bridge and drink tea," he said. "It's piggish out. Saw you to-day, Mainwaring, lunching in grumpy solitude, but you wouldn't look my way. You mustn't let him take to bad bachelor chops, Lady Mainwaring."

Grumpy solitude! Margaret looked quickly at her husband.

"I was trying not to feel greedy as I'd begun without my guest," said Roland, taking some cake. The lies were getting glib now.

Margaret's white hands flitted about her table; measuring tea from the gold caddy, turning up the flame of the lamp.

"I'm so old-fashioned," she said brightly. "Tea is never the same made downstairs, and I hate silver tea-pots."

It was bitter-sweet to Roland. His—and yet not his. Fear leaping to a lover's heart. What if she would not marry him again. If some scruple drove her from him for ever. He almost groaned then. She was his ideal and his love. The cheap atmosphere which he had left made her more precious.

Fragrance of China tea contrasted with the weak stuff poured from the plated tea-pot; tiny delicate cakes instead of the gaudy iced squares of stale stuff sent in from a confectioner's, smeared with pink and green, dotted with lumpy decoration. The absence of colour and beauty in his guardian's house made him revel in it now. The deep colouring of good pictures, the harmony of shaded lights, the beauty of rich dresses were always a joy to him.

It was this starvation which had made him spring to extremes, take glare for light, glitter for diamonds, crude red and white and blue for blending harmony.

His money made this house luxurious. Lady Grace had been comfortable, but nothing more. He knew how Margaret delighted in her furs and laces, her jewels and her splendid house. If—it should be his part to put her away from them—to cast her out into the cold with spiteful women pointing at her as they passed.

So silence. His burden his own. Let the pain be what it might.

They played — four well-matched players. And

Roland could not lose. Cards were where he wanted them—his finesses were always right. He held strong hands when he wanted them.

His pile of gold grew.

"You are bewitched to-night, Mainwaring. You cannot lose," Luttrell said. "Any other lead and we were lost. That was genius."

"Lucky in cards. What is it?—Unlucky in love?" Lady Raven looked at her tiny watch. "You are lucky in both, Sir Roland."

He grew pale—stammered. What was this little pile of futile winnings, this burst of luck, if the rest of the proverb were to hold? Margaret might never forgive him when she knew.

"Let me pray for luck in both," he said almost tremulously.

"Why pray for what you have? I must really go now, Madgie. It's almost dinner-time. We'll meet again in an hour."

There was a big dinner to-night—a reception afterwards. A great singer was obliging, unpaid, of course. But her host knew that next day a present worth five hundred pounds must be sent to Madame Melina or she would never sing again for him. The nightingale never puts forth her liquid notes for mere friendship's sake.

It was a long dinner—a huge reception. The cold, wet night shut out, the rooms warm, glowing with lights. Dinner over but an hour or so, and then supper, a second dinner with hot soup and quails and cutlets—and yet people coined appetite and ate.

Roland took his wife in, looking for a place at one of the little tables, each with its crimson shaded lights as if a host of butterflies hovered over the shining white

cloths and gleaming silver. Roses—brought from abroad—dewy crimson flowers, faintly fragrant.

"Can we sit here. Dear Margaret, find room for us." Vera Greene's soft voice cooed at them. She had Sir Mark with her, a plainly unwilling captive, with his dark eyes looking sulkily at the turquoise and diamond necklace on Mrs Greene's thin neck.

"They do one so perfectly here. One wishes one had not dined. Henry de Litz got his *chef* in Paris, you know." Mrs Greene's dinner did not spoil her enjoyment of a quail stuffed with olives and served with a cunning sauce. Margaret took a little soup and nothing more.

"Yes—from Paris. It's the only place they make cooks. Here we have people who bake and boil and fry—there they take cows and sheep and make poems of them." Vera was frankly greedy. "Can anything be more awful than lunch on Sunday with a suburban aunt, and boiled chickens, all there except their heads and feet, and even their poor little livers and gizzards tucked under their wings?"

"That quail is very much the same," said Roland, dryly. He did not like Mrs Greene.

"Oh, no, he is boned and made into bird semblance again with chopped olives. No, there is no town like Paris. When are you going there again, Margaret dear?"

"In the spring, I hope," answered Margaret.

"You remember when I met you there, with your great sheaf of lilies. Would anyone except your dear self, Margaret, lose hours in Paris to put flowers on some poor nun's grave? By the way"—always the barb behind the roses—"I thought all nuns were buried in their convents."

"I don't think I said it was a nun." Margaret had grown white, the glass in her hand shook slightly.

"Oh, I thought you did—or Roland did. You went out to see some nun, she was dead."

Margaret was whiter still. "No, she was alive," she said coldly.

"Oh! curiously enough—" The little scandal-monger's eyes were bright. "I went to the cemetery that time—to see it. I'd never been there—there were such curious monuments. One was just a slab with Marguerite—died such a date, and nothing more. There was some sad history there—you may swear." Vera let her voice droop softly. "Some love who buried a love he could not name fully, some child—perhaps—whose mother—Margaret, you look ill—faint—"

"It is the heat here." Margaret got up, rubbing her ghastly cheeks. "And graveyards are not cheering, Vera. I—have a horror of death."

"Margaret—she made you ill." Roland held his wife's arm as they went through the glittering crowd. "My dear, what a subject to choose."

"She chose it purposely," burst from Margaret. "She thought—scented—" She swayed and nearly fell.

All resolutions died when Roland held her in his arms, as they drove home. He could not leave her now, but sat watching her in the dim light as she slept, fitfully moaning and tossing.

"Marguerite," she muttered once. "And—if—if—he—knew—Roland."

"I am here, sweetheart."

"Roland, you will catch cold. I am not ill. Don't sit there in your clothes."

He lay down, pulling the eider-down over him, holding the golden head on his shoulder—but he did not kiss her.

If he dared tell her—now—the moment passed, and he lay sleepless with her head against his—with every sense in him cursing fate. Yet doggedly resolute still. Once he knew—Margaret should never say he had wronged her. When he was free she would hold out her hands and tell him he had done right.

CHAPTER XIII

"ROLAND, Paul says we can go back to Lyme Regis—there is no fear of infection there now."

"We can go at once then, Margaret." Roland's voice came tonelessly.

Another dreary fortnight had dragged away. A fortnight when he had dreaded each post, started at every ring, each call upon the 'phone.

A fortnight in which Violet had been blotted out and made no sign. Free from scented scrawls, yet fearing them at every moment. One must come, and since it had not to-day, it might to-morrow.

He had begged her to write to one of his clubs, but he knew her reckless thoughtlessness. If she believed he would be at home, and so not answer her quickly, she would send to his house.

He grew thin and haggard in those weary, leaden days, and hour by hour a coldness crept up between him and his wife. She did not ask him now if he was ill—she began to hold proudly aloof—there were no more half-hours in her pretty room, as she rested before dinner. A weaker woman would have come sobbing in hot anger and perhaps learnt the truth. Margaret was too proud.

He was losing her. Roland knew—and the dogged resolution held him dumb. Margaret must be spared. This hurt would pass when she knew.

He watched silently, miserably, as, instead of coming

out with him, she went more and more to the poor parish in the East End—and came back white and worn out.

"Where is Roland to-day? You are my old helper again now, Margaret?" Knox Harding welcomed her, as day after day she came and they went from house to house, from wretched room to room.

"I do not know where Roland is—gone to his Club, I fancy." She tried to hide the hurt in her—to speak lightly. "He was hunting yesterday and trained down to Rugby. We are getting quite old married people now, Roland and I."

"You—never wonder where he goes to, Margaret?" Knox Harding had brought her back to the soot-smeared brown house which the Church allotted him. A huge chimney belching smoke out just above it—a brown patch of earth at the back, pock-marked with two sour flower-beds. Sooty creepers, crawling leafless across a grinning brick wall. Sordid—unlovely. And the room was merely made livable in. It was not furnished. Strong ugly chairs and table—a bookcase filled with sober-backed books. A big ivory crucifix hung on the writing-table. It was drawing-room and dining-room to the clergyman. He spent every minute he could spare outside.

He made his own tea now, taking a caddy from a locked cupboard—with a bowl of sugar—a jug of thin milk, and some hard biscuits. On their way home he had bought some slices of red cake for Margaret—she drank the hot, weak tea, set out on a clean cloth.

"Wonder—where he goes to? How— What do you mean, Ralph?"

Ralph Knox Harding looked at her pale face—his anger thundering in him. This man left her, saw her

fret, while he went to some painted woman—she *should* know, or at least have some suspicion.

"Mean! Roland was always with you, Margaret. Is there not something wrong? Can you—not—date it?"

He leant across the table then. His deep-set eyes flashing.

"I don't know—understand. It's natural, I suppose." Her pale clear skin had flamed to carnation. "Date it—date what?"

"Margaret! Men are men—and your husband had strange friends to marry as he did. Has anyone—written to him—called him back as it were?"

Written! she sat very still then—there had been that scented, deep mauve letter, with its heavy scent. Next day another, hidden from her. And the date of that first letter marked the beginning of her husband's coldness. A letter in a woman's scrawling hand—written on vulgar paper, scented. She shook herself slightly as if she tried to throw some hideous thought away. Roland, to tire of her and go back to some woman he had met before. Roland—he would not do it.

"You — don't know anything, Ralph?" she faltered.

"Nothing, Margaret, except that this man is neglecting you, my soul's love," he said fiercely. "That I met him twice down in St John's Wood coming from some house there, and that each time he coined some excuse as to his absence."

"I will not believe it." She got up, trembling, but her face was steadfast. "I will not believe it, Ralph. Roland would not care for me and anyone else—" She stopped.

And—anyone else. Did he care for her at all now? He had separated himself from her. He left her to herself. Suddenly, strangely, without apparent reason. Could it mean that a man had tired of what he had professed to adore? that all the quiet joy he had often talked about had lost zest? His pride in her beauty, his love of home.

"He would not," she said aloud, more steadily as if she drove out the words, then said good-bye and drove back to her mother's house.

Paul was in London, going back with them. Paul, privileged friend, put reserve aside and spoke to Roland.

"Old man, what is it? There is something wrong. Something between you and Margaret."

"Nothing, Paul." The desire to speak was so great that Roland had to force it back.

"No!" Paul Hesling lighted his big pipe, sucking at it thoughtfully. "Take it as I mean it, Roland, but you're less together. Margaret looks tired and delicate, too delicate to slave in that East End parish."

"I—I—I suppose it's natural—that we—should not be—such foolish lovers," but how the words stuck, almost piteously.

"It's not natural. It's conventional, and rottenly so." Paul's voice rang sharply. "Don't act, Roland, you do it badly, man; if there's been some foolish quarrel, go to her—to Margaret. Put it down and stamp on it, even if the stamping hurts your naked feet."

"We have had no quarrel, old man. None. Perhaps I—" Roland stood up—looking into the fire. "Perhaps I—was never good enough to marry a girl like Margaret—after what—I'd been through."

"What you'd been through! An ordinary baptism of folly. One of fire to you, brought up as you were. It's the law of our natures, Roland, that few of us bring white lives to our weddings—Cæsar's wives must be above suspicion, but Cæsar himself would not walk so confidently in his sable wedding suit if he were innocent as the bride he is about to take. It's rot, old chap, going back over that. Of course, if you played the fool now—"

A sudden rush of scarlet to Roland's face: he hid it by turning quickly, but not too quickly for Paul to see the flush and frightened look.

Paul checked his words. It could not be that. Roland was not such a fool—worse than a fool—to throw the pearl of his happiness before the swine of passing fancy. Had some shadow of his past risen up to clutch him? Was he weak enough for this?

"Roland!" He sat up quickly. He was years older than this dark boy who had come so strangely into his life. "Roland—if it's anyone—who's risen up to bother you—let me deal with them. You're so good-natured, given to exaggerating your share in a week's madness. Tell me, dear boy, and let me do with it."

Tell him—of the coughing, dying woman in her over-warm house—the woman who was his wife by law. Tell Paul that Margaret was a woman who had never been married. No. He could not.

"There is—no one," he forced himself to say.

The butler came in with some letters. Roland could not help his start, his quick, nervous sorting of the pile, his sigh of relief as he saw no envelope in tints of violet.

He had heard nothing of Violet for a fortnight now. The telephone bell whirred quickly. Paul went to it.

"It's someone for you, Roland. Someone who wants you particularly."

Roland almost flung himself aside, setting his teeth. But only Vera Greene begging them to take her to the *Green Dragon* that night. "She'd heard Margaret say they had a box—if they had room—could they?"

"I'll let you know—I'll ask Margaret." He hung the receiver up, but sweat glistened on his forehead. He had been so sure he would hear the hoarse, high voice jarring in his ears.

"I think I'll go up to the Club, Paul. I may have some letters there. Letters which may want answering." He rang to order the car.

Paul came with him. Talking very little as they hummed westward. He could not understand Roland. His nervousness—his new reserve. There was a dogged look of suffering about him, as if of some man who is stricken by some deadly disease and bears the pain, telling no one of his ills.

"Letters? Yes, there were two or three." Two, clearly circulars. One which made Roland start and flinch. Rough paper, deep mauve, a golden V trailing across the flap. He caught it, stuffing it into his pocket and the scent of violets drifted strongly from it.

Paul walked to the reading-room without a word. He would leave Roland to read the thing undisturbed.

"It's some friend of his late wife's, blackmailing him," he muttered to himself. "Threatening to expose her no doubt, and so rake up a scandal."

To his surprise Roland followed him. Went to the window and read his letter there.

"Just a line to tell you I'm pretty well now. Greening's back and got some new stuff for me. He leaves for Moscow on Monday. You must come to see me."

She was pretty well. He forgot the careless opti-

mism of the consumption. What if she were to live on for a year—even for years?

He would have to leave Margaret—go away abroad again and disappear. The big scrawl went on. "By the way, my mother's getting turned out of her shop for a few hundreds—I can't ask Greening, he doesn't know I've got a mother, but it's nothing to you. Bring the money along on Monday."

She asked coolly, carelessly, as for a right. After all, if she betrayed herself, she would have the right to many hundreds until he divorced her.

Monday. He would be at Lyme Regis then. Would have to come up and cash a cheque and take the notes himself to her.

He moved to the fire, tore the letter up and thrust it in, beating it down until it was ashes.

Margaret was at home when they came in. A pale Margaret, with eyes which were dark from hidden pain.

"Oh, Paul!" She was always glad to see him. "We can go down on Saturday."

"Yes, Margaret. You are glad?"

"Glad—oh, how glad!" she almost cried. "I have learnt to hate London lately. It will be different there." Her eyes on Roland, entreating, wondering. They would take up their lives again in the quiet country—putting this shadow away.

Roland gave her Mrs Greene's message.

"I hate the woman— But—she shan't see she annoys me. Yes, tell her she may come. I have a vacant seat."

The dread of Monday held Roland in its grip. He sat quiet, glum, smoking cigarette after cigarette, until it was time to dress.

He had seen the *Green Dragon* before. He hated its

stereotyped wit, its hashed-up songs, its brilliant choruses. They came late to find Mrs Greene ensconced in the box. "I was alone and only had a cutlet, so came on here, dear Margaret."

There was reproach for not having been asked to dinner. It was taken equably.

"She's my tiddly iddity, tiddly iddity girl of my heart"—

rang the latest chorus which London adored. Roland sat down with a sigh. Musical comedy unfortunately permitted conversation during the acts, and Mrs Greene was not likely to spare him.

"It's a jolly thing, isn't it? I wanted to see the new green fire-dance to-night. How full the house is. Crowds of people one knows, I daresay, even in the dress-circle." And then, with a titter—"How that woman is staring at you, Sir Roland. You've made quite a conquest."

"What woman!" The words died on his lips, which slipped back on a frozen grin of sheer fear and annoyance. Violet! close to them in the front row. Violet with a stout man at one side and a stout girl at the other, her gay dress and flashing jewels mocking their crude respectability.

And by his side, Margaret—pale and queenly—quietly dressed in white, wearing only pearls. A rope of them, exquisitely matched. Somewhere—far off—he heard the silly, maddening refrain:

"My tiddly iddity, tiddly iddity girl of my heart—
She's my—"

He pulled his mouth straight somehow—sat back so that the curtain shaded him. He heard his own voice, saying something, and was not quite sure if it was something sensible.

Mrs Greene chattered, babbled to the end of the chorus. The frantic clapping of the delighted house.

"Charming, isn't it? The woman is staring still, Sir Roland—better come out and delight her eyes."

"Paul!" He stooped down. "I've a most awful headache. If I could slip away— Tell Margaret—"

Next moment he was gone. Staggering down the stairs, raging at the fates. How dared they send this torment on him? A torment which seemed to have no ending.

"It must be that woman," said Mrs Greene to herself.

The woman peered on at the box, looking for Roland, then fell into a fit of coughing and took to whispering and pointing at people in the house—as if she knew them by sight.

Violet trusted to her altered looks and the changed colour of her hair as she came boldly out into the world. Lady Cosway was in the stalls. Violet leant over, nodding towards her, showing her knowledge of great people. The stout cousin had only caught a glimpse of Roland—but the glimpse roused her.

"That's your cousin there, Mr Roland."

"Lawdy, no," said Violet, coolly, but flushing hotly herself now. What a fool to have brought this girl out with her.

The second danger only struck Roland as he got to the humming streets—that fat girl might have seen him —might busy herself to find out who he was.

Clever Mrs Greene was afire with excitement now. Those whispers, glances, Roland's flight — made clear evidence of something. Something to hide. Some old acquaintance perhaps—but every scent is worth following to some babbling hounds.

Margaret left early, gave up her supper-party, hurried to Lancaster Gate to find Roland lying back in a big chair, white and worn.

"I am so sorry, dear," he said unhappily. "My head is splitting. I had to come away."

"Mrs Greene said someone startled you." Margaret stood looking at him. "Was there anyone, Roland?"

"Who started my head into aching. It's bad neuralgia, Margaret. How Mrs Greene loves surmise."

Mrs Greene would love to rend and tear at the downfall of this tall, gentle girl: "My Lady Mainwaring, who was so *very* particular—my dear. Fancy, she was never married at all!"

The agony was more for Margaret than for himself. It was getting on his nerves, making him physically ill.

"I will take some sleeping stuff," he said jerkily. "Get to bed—"

"Good-night," she said, so wearily that he turned, longing to throw himself down before her and tell her everything. Anything rather than she should think he did not love her.

"Then, good-night," he said at last, and went slowly to his room.

They left London on a mild January day. Soft sunlight fell on bare trees and steel-grey rivers. It was warm, bright, a touch of spring in the mild air.

Margaret's spirits rose. London left behind, she felt life would change—Roland tell her of the trouble which had come to them.

Woman-like, memory tormented her, with a torment she held to her heart. They had come on this journey on their wedding-day. He could not forget. Surely Roland could not forget.

Forget, when every mile brought memories, biting and bitter to him.

It had been summer then; the fields bathed in a heat haze, the streams running shallow and clear, and he had wondered if a man can be too happy. Released so unexpectedly, marrying the one woman in the world for him. The thought of the thoughts which had been with them then were each a separate torment.

Paul was travelling with them. He had wanted to go to another carriage, but Roland forced him to come in. As the powerful engine pulled her freight on through the quiet country, hope rose unconsciously. Hope with her light wings clogged by fear.

One of the big cars met them, purring out on the smooth roads to Lyme Regis, swooping in through the huge iron gates, up the long avenue.

Margaret stood on the doorstep, her furs framing her sweet face; stood there, looking out across the park and lake, as if they were friends she took to her heart—then with the same look, pausing in the hall, smiling at the waiting servants with a gentle word for the head men and women—going into the morning-room, always with the same absorbed look, on to the library. Roland was in there—the men were bringing tea.

Some houses shelter us, and some are homes—Lyme Regis was the latter.

Pulling her gloves off slowly, Margaret watched the men go out. Half timidly, she put a hand on Roland's.

"I—am so glad to be home, Roland," she said simply.

He held the hand in his, raised and kissed it, with all his yearning heart in his eyes.

The timidity hurt him—that she, his wife, should

almost fear repulse. She loved the stately home and she meant never to leave it.

"Oh, Margaret," he said hungrily, hopelessly. "Margaret— At least—I can give you this place."

"At least? Roland!" She started. "Roland, you can give me much more," she said pleadingly, leaving her hand in his.

"Ah, tea is ready." Paul Hesling was at the door—old Basling with him.

It was a welcome home from the thin tutor, growing very elderly now, but happy as he had never been.

There was so much to talk of. Alterations—the Jersey herd—the trout-hatching—the gardens. All the interests which bind a man to his own dwelling-place.

Margaret would shut up the drawing-room. Make the room near it into one instead. Move all the smaller treasures there. She was girlish, animated as they talked. Half the house must be shrouded in brown holland. She was not going to be extravagant.

Paul, looking at some papers in his hands, wished ruefully that Miss Browne could be shrouded in brown holland and left in it.

"She's ordered alterations herself, since you left, Roland. Some new electric thing, driven by the dynamo outside."

"You see," Paul bit at a pencil, "Roland can't go on spending twenty-five thousand a year out of twenty, can he? This last thing cost four hundred and my lady-cook said she had your authority, wrote in your name."

"Oh! send Mrs Hendricks here."

The housekeeper bustling in. Whisper and rustle in the servants' wing. Something was up. Fiery glances were cast towards M ss Browne, who lounged away her day in her own sitting-room now.

"Mrs Hendricks, tell me the truth, is this cook dreadfully extravagant?"

"Extravagant!" Mrs Hendricks hands in air. "A wasteful, impertinent—ahem—hussy—your ladyship's pardon. And cook! Every dish that was on the table came from London in boxes or bottles, no less. Her ladyship did not examine the accounts—they were monstrous, colossal in their waste. Made dishes at a pound each — some of them cutlets, vol-au-vents—mayonnaise—sweets—savouries. Browne did little or nothing."

"I had yearned for chops," said Roland, pensively.

"Thank you," from Margaret. "Now, send Browne here."

The lady-cook flouncing upstairs, trembling lest her despotic rule should be imperilled.

"Why was this electric heater ordered—without authority?"

Browne understood she was to have all proper means of cooking. She had directed the local tradesmen to put it—

"No, not the local tradesmen." This from Paul. "A London firm who gave you good commission."

Browne flushed hotly. "You have exceeded your authority," said Margaret. "Also I did not understand that all your made dishes came from London. You can go, Browne."

"Now, madam? Well, indeed—" Gulps, nods, etc.

"Yes—when it suits you."

It suited Browne to make it that evening and shake the dust of Lyme Regis from her feet.

The snubbed butler, the old housekeeper, saw the station brougham come round with open smiles of joy.

Kitty, the head kitchen-maid, sent up a plain dinner, perfectly cooked. Kitty had dreams of staying on as cook.

"The housekeeping was honestly terrific, Margaret. On a ratio suitable to a Rothschild. I'm glad the woman's going."

"Yes—I want to save Roland expense. I'm afraid I had no real idea of what we were spending. I'll take it up now."

"You are rich enough not to worry, Margaret. It's only when extravagance is really sinful, as in Browne's case."

Thee vening passed quickly, pleasantly. Then Margaret said good-night—going alone up the wide shallow stairs, past great pictures, statues, on to the upper landing, and down the still corridor to her own rooms. A wood fire flashed in the low basket grate, flinging rays on mellow mahogany, and the silver on her table. She sent her maid away.

It was so still and peaceful here, with no roar of traffic and scream of passing trains; the air coming in through the open window was pure and fresh, untainted by soot.

Margaret slipped into a white wrapper—let her golden hair fall loose. So she had waited—months ago—for Roland. And now—he must remember. He must.

She stood at the long glass, switched on the lights; they showed her tall, fair; the loose sleeves falling back from her rounded arms, the wrapper slipping aside showing her limbs gleaming through cobwebby lawn; she was lovely, and glad of it because she loved.

Steps now—her heart throbbed—coming quietly, almost stealthily down the corridor. The door of

Roland's room closed softly. Would the steps come on? The door between his room and hers open? Would she hear—

"What, up still, sweetheart?"

No sound, no voice—silence until she left the chair by the fire and going to the door, turned the key—turned it with cool, bitter pride on her face and put it away in a silver cabinet.

Never again would she try to break the ice between them.

She did not see on the other side of the door—a man who crouched in the dimness before a dying fire with the big tears which rend a man's soul dripping through his cold fingers.

CHAPTER XIV

No malice next day in Margaret's gentle greeting. But a new, weary coldness. Roland talked of the schemes discussed the night before. "Oh, if he wished. Yes, they could do them."

She would get the men to move in the furniture. Better close the unwanted rooms at once.

Later, Roland saw her directing, studying effect, interested, despite herself, in the placing of Sheraton and Adams and Chippendale; in the choice of groups and figures from the great array of china; the careful putting up of the larger pieces.

The long morning grew to swift beauty. Five or six sitting-rooms were more than enough. The huge drawing-room was almost too regal in its size.

"When we come in for millions and give a ball, we'll fix it up again. How bright it is outside."

Margaret left her room, strolled hatless to the gardens. Down the walk, bordered by clipped yews, on to the wicket gate leading to the front gardens.

Quaintly lovely, with flagged paths and box borders, sloping up to great domed conservatories, and beyond that away to a silver lake. In summer the borders would flame with old-fashioned flowers, and only one lawn be devoted to the coloured, scentless monstrosities so dear to the gardener's heart.

The faint, bitter smell of box, drifted from the clipped hedges.

Margaret stood looking at it with eyes which lost their bitterness.

The key of the door was in its silver box; she had not heard Roland turn the handle that morning and go away without a word. He came in every day before they went down.

Something had happened. What, she could not tell. Woman-like, she racked her brain for reasons. Had she been too careless about money, extravagant? Could there—some thought drove the faint colour from her cheeks. The thought which held her dumb, when otherwise she would have spoken.

With bent head, walking as a woman shamed, she went on to the conservatories. The soft, warm air was heavy with scent; rows of fuchsias, of hyacinths and narcissi glowed on the shelves.

The head gardener came quickly to her, pointing out his favourites; hinting for the praise dear to all true gardeners.

He took her on to the hot-houses, stood sighing in the small orchid-house at the end.

"If her ladyship could get him that new house put up." His soul yearned for that mauve orchid. "It could cover the house, grow in a shoot of flower."

"Later," she told him gently. "We cannot afford it this year. And your houses are so beautiful, M'Kenzie, you ought not to want others."

"She's a leddy, she is," said the great man to a subordinate. "A pleasure to grow for her. But she's looking sair sad is her leddyship."

Sair sad—as she stood alone on the flagged path, the soft winter sun shining on her fair hair. Sad and frightened.

So Roland found her as he came down to the houses,

new resolution driving him. Margaret must keep her home, and he his secret.

"Roland," her voice rang sadly, "will you drive over to the Grange to-morrow? The child there has broken an arm."

"To-morrow—I—I—must go to London, Margaret."

"To London again." The shadow of the city they had left pursued them here.

"Yes, I have some business there. People I must see—"

A flush, and a look which was half hurt pride and half fear.

"Roland," she said suddenly, quickly. Then stopped as quickly as she had begun, and walked slowly down the path, back to the house.

Old Basling lunched with them, garrulous, happy; but the cloud hung heavy over host and hostess.

Paul spoke of a case which filled the papers. A family scandal brought unexpectedly to light.

"Things are found out so strangely," he said. "All this through some old half-burnt letter. And—why not have buried it now—the past is past."

"Some men cannot forgive," said Roland, absently. "Especially their wives."

"Perhaps it's better to have this case than to live on estranged." Margaret crumbled her bread nervously. "And—as you say, some men are implacable, where their wives are concerned. The past is a sin which cannot be overlooked." Her voice shook.

"You think so?" Roland looked at her so sadly that the men lowered their eyes. It was a look from man to wife. A private thing which it seemed an indecency to strip naked at a luncheon-table.

"Yes. I am forced to think so." She spoke with effort; went away soon and left the men to smoke.

It was black misery for Roland to take train for London. To steam back, away from his home, to the huge smoky city which held his tragedy.

He drove straight to Violet's house. She was thinner, more flushed, but the gaiety of her disease held her up. Knowing she was dying, she yet could not think it any nearer.

"Violet." Roland stood up; he meant his visit to be a short one. "If you come out to theatres, it will all be over soon. Someone will know you."

She laughed carelessly. "Who would?" she said. "Hemmed in by husband and cousin-in-law. I'm sorry though. Here, Roland, you're looking dying. Why don't you tell this wife of yours?"

Impulse drove him to confidence. He spoke rapidly, giving some sketch of his reasons. Of what he felt and suffered.

He could not tell. Could not have Margaret lose her home.

The sick woman sat up, watching him. She made no comment until he stopped speaking.

Then she sighed sharply. "You're just a hang fool, and a bit of orl right," she said gruffly. "Lordy, and to think of the life I led you. Roland, I've half a mind to go and tell her myself. There—there—don't jump. I'll swear I won't. But if she's half a woman, she'd help you through and let book morality slide. It's not your fault. Couldn't you live like pure doves until I'm gone?"

"She—you don't understand. She would go straight away from me. Give up her position. Perhaps enter some sisterhood."

"Oh, they're outside me, these good people," jerked Violet. "But stick to it your own way. I won't worry you much. Just at the last I'll send for you. Say—did you bring the ooff? Four hundred—"

The money—he had forgotten it.

"I'm sorry, Violet. The banks are open still. I'll fly up, bring it back at once."

He hurried away, and Fate, not weary yet of ill-nature, must send Ralph Knox Harding to the same bank, to cash a cheque of Margaret's for some charity.

He was counting his notes when he saw Roland.

"How! In notes?" he heard. "Yes, eight of fifty each. That will do."

"Why—Sir Roland. I thought you were at Lyme Regis."

"I came up on business." Roland took his eight crisp notes. "I'm in a hurry now. Good-bye."

"A hurry, yes." But Knox Harding followed him, pushed hard at the heavy door and was just in time to see Roland drive away.

He jumped into another taxi, tried to follow, vainly. He lost his quarry at the top of Regent Street.

"Did you see the number?" The clergyman paid his fare, questioning the driver eagerly.

"Not a l, sir. There was an eight in it. It was a Gamage cab."

A task this, to find out all Gamage cabs. A task which would take time and mean employing an agent.

Knox Harding stood on the pavement, turned slowly away, going across to Bond Street; he had to call at a shop there.

"Oh, Mr Knox Harding, how nice to meet again."

Mrs Greene, fluttering softly; out in search of a lunch. One often met hospitable people in the mornings.

Mrs Greene wanted to gossip. She looked at the thin, ascetic face, and thought of Margaret Mainwaring.

"Lunch with me," she said civilly. "I was just going to mine."

"Thank you," he answered absently, but he went with her.

Mrs Greene sighed as she descended to the grill-room. She could do it more cheaply there.

"And how is dear Margaret?" she cooed, relief seizing her as her guest chose fish and nothing else, and water to drink.

"I saw Sir Roland just now," he said, "up from Lyme Regis."

"So soon." Mrs Greene began to enjoy her cutlet. "Poor dear; he saw some old friend on Friday night at the Frivolity, and fled homewards from her glance."

Fresh evidence. Fresh insult flung on Margaret. There was really someone then.

"Perhaps—a present acquaintance," he flamed out angrily. "All is not right there, Mrs Greene."

"A present acquaintance, Mr Knox Harding. Why, the man *adores* Margaret."

"But Margaret is good and pure, and her type does not appeal to some men," he said sternly.

Oh, this was worth a lunch. Worth even a small bottle of Beaune—and a liqueur to follow.

Knox Harding bent across the table. "You did not see the woman closely?" he asked. "You did not happen to watch her going out."

It was exactly what Mrs Greene had done. "She was a thin, palpably improper-looking person—I heard her give the address somewhere in St John's Wood."

"My God!" With every nerve thrilled, with hot anger raging, Knox Harding shot the words out. He

was right then. Roland was leading a double life, deceiving his young wife.

The hidden passion in him drove him half mad; set the torch of his intolerant fanaticism alight. He would trace this, find out, and show no mercy; for Margaret must know.

With whip and spur, he would drive Roland back to the straight path. He should not sin in secret and go unscathed.

Mrs Greene sipped *crême-de-menthe*, and prepared to enjoy herself.

" Oh, Mr Knox Harding. Do tell me—as a friend. What do you suspect? What is it? Can I help? "

But lunch was badly paid for. The woman, knowing nothing definite, was of no further use to him.

" It was kind of you to ask me here. I must go at once. There is an appointment I had forgotten. Good-bye. I know nothing definite."

Mrs Greene was almost hysterical. In a minute her guest had vanished. Fled away brusquely, left her to pay the bill and tip the waiter. She had meant at least to hand him the bill and let him do that.

Mrs Greene's day was almost spoilt. She owed it to herself to call upon three friends and hint at the " dreadful affair " about to transpire. " A pair just married too. Oh, I can't tell. Sir R. M. Now—I've given no name. Already, my dear. A second establishment in the suburbs somewhere. Oh, not a word to anyone. What's that! Lila Storme again. Annexed young Graham Bently. Oh, my dear, how delicious—the woman is scarcely decent now."

Yet when that evening she met Mrs Storme at Bridge, she called her dear, and whispered the scandal to her.

Noisome things—the Vera Greenes of the world. Living on the garbage of life, taking their enjoyment from the cry of broken hearts, the dull stare of tragic despair.

It was delicious because the Pirate Lila had taken Graham Bently away from his young wife. Delicious because the girl's life was spoilt by it, and she would never believe in faith or love again.

Birds who skim on the mire at low tide, dipping their beaks into its shimmering foulness.

When Knox Harding strode so fast out of Princes, it was with a goal in view. Strange fate perhaps that he should go to the same firm which Paul Hesling had employed, that he should see the same man.

"Sir Roland Mainwaring—yes—yes." These men must take their orders without question; it is their method of living. But the inquiry agent was curious enough to turn back his books and look the case up.

"Rum go," he said at last. "And a bit of a job here. Send me Rickets, please." This through a tube. "The man who does the cab jobs."

Roland had taken back the money, bidden Violet good-bye.

She held his hand in hers as they parted. "Roland, go and tell her. You're making trouble now. Straight you are! Oh, I'll be careful! Only write to the Club. Unless I'm offing it. And then I must wire. Just 'Come'—you'll know. You're an idiot, Roland, but a good idiot."

He had an hour to put in before his train; was driving to his Club when a woman waved and screamed to him. It was Ruth Cosway.

"Roland! Do you know where she is. Has she got you to help her?"

"My dear lady— Has who—What?" He stood, bewildered.

"Agatha. She walked away this morning and simply rang up to say she wasn't coming back. She said she would rather starve than marry 'that unwholesome thing Levenge.' It was quite indelicate, down the telephone, where anyone may overhear."

"Agatha has run away," said Roland, almost cheerfully. "She is Agatha Lessingham now, and supremely happy."

Speech which made it necessary to bundle a shrieking peeress into the nearest shop, where she drank water and wailed.

"Roland, ring up for me—I've been searching at her dressmakers—everything—ring up—see if she's back."

A discreet voice answered the call. "Lady Agatha is not back, sir. No, but she has 'phoned to say she was married by registry."

"Anything else."

"And that, begging pawdon—Mr Levenge could go to the horspital for a nurse, stead of takin' her."

Roland delivered the message callously. He was not sorry for his cousin.

"Ruined, disgraced—a beggar," moaned her ladyship. "I'll never see her again. I'll disown her. Unless—Toddington can do anything at the War Office. He may get this wretch a billet. The *Morning Post*," almost screamed Lady Cosway, "get me the number. Ring up. She shall have her wedding in as if she was respectable."

So Agatha was disposed of. Roland hurried to his train, black care upon his shoulder. Violet was better. And was he a ghoul that he should wish for a fellow-creature's death? Poor soul; she had sailed out of her

first haven. Now she was resting in the last anchorage she would know.

Black care making him dull and absent—biting him deftly as he saw Margaret again.

All the love and longing in him leaping up, battering at resolution with strident voice.

" Go to her. Take her in your arms. See that sad look slip from her dear face. Don't be a fool, Roland. She can never blame you."

And yet—he fought the longing down. Kissed her cheek with burning, yet gentle lips; sighed bitterly, and left her.

Left her with frightened, troubled eyes, and tears smarting behind her lids.

Religion, the fervour of hard work, would have been better than this. To have known the fulness of life and lost it so soon.

The post next day brought a letter from Ralph. A long one, written in his neat, crabbed hand.

" Margaret, things are not right. Do not play the coward now, but stand up and bring this husband to his senses. Margaret, there is someone else. He goes to some woman—from *you*—from *you*. I shall know more in a few days."

Margaret threw the letter down.

" No—it could not be. Ralph was mistaken."

Yet—she sent a wire to him.

" Come down see me."

And then in her own pretty room, all decked with daisies, she saw him.

Stood fair and tall, and coldly angry.

"Ralph, how dared you write this. This, of my husband?"

"Because it is true, Margaret," he answered sullenly.

"It is not true," she said, splendid in her loyalty. "I say it is not true."

"But there is estrangement. You told me that, and—here is the reason. I have found it out for you."

"Ah, no, it is not the reason." The words came with low sigh, almost a cry of misery.

"Margaret, I say it is! I've seen him twice down in the same direction. Yesterday, he was up cashing a big cheque. I saw him. Margaret, the mire has stuck to him, and he shall come back to you and lose it."

That was his thought, to frighten the backslider, drive him back to the wife he dared to leave. So he told himself, insistently, and deemed it true. Yet, below this, something more human drove him. His love for this fair girl, the baffled passion in him, seething and burning, making him without pity or true insight.

"Send him back to me." He saw her colour flutter, her slight hands clench. "That is beyond you, Ralph."

"I think not." He was pleased to have won admission. "It is some passing madness. A spell worked by the past. Found out—it will end—for ever."

"I say I do not believe it." The voice of a loving woman was strong in protest. All the sweetness of their married life rose to deny it; the perfection of passion between true lovers; the vows—the memories more sacred to women than men. And then—so soon—to put the arms which had held her, about another woman, and that woman one of the sad sisterhood who

gave themselves for gold. No, and no again. She wiped the shield of Roland's honour clean.

"It is not true," she rang out. "There is some other reason, Ralph. Roland would kill you if he heard of this. Saw this cruel letter."

That she should care like this. That so much love should be wasted on a man who deceived her. All his passion and adoration for Margaret rose in him, until with shaking voice and limbs he jumped up, caught her soft round arms and thrust his thin face close to hers; the deep-set eyes burnt with a light almost of madness.

"And if I make you believe. If I bring you proof. Show you the woman—What then?"

"Then before my God," she said proudly, "I will leave Roland, and go into some sisterhood, where I will never see a man again."

"Not that, Margaret. Come, instead, and work with me—"

"Or perhaps that," she said. "But if this dared to be truth, the world will never know Margaret Mainwaring again."

"The proof you shall have," he said, his voice ringing fervently. "No, I'll not eat here, Margaret. But it's not to force you to folly. It's to bring Roland back. You must not do as you say."

"There would be no coming back. But—it is not true— Good-bye, Ralph. I believe you mean well."

The motor waited at the door. He went away again.

Roland was out hunting.

Margaret said nothing of her visitor. Her whole nature was up in arms. Outraged at this thought. It was shame to her to have given herself, if this could be; the bond was sacred to her; without dream of its ever

being broken. She thought she could never hold up her head again, if, husband and lover, he had left her for another. He was hers by right of love as well as marriage vows, and since she could never have been wife to a man she did not love, the shame seemed more to her than him.

Roland—untrue. Roland, who had loved her so madly. Who had told her he had never looked at another woman with eyes of real love.

No. It *was* not true. It was not the reason—She drooped her head with her old look of furtive fear; the look Paul had seen so often and wondered at. He saw it now, and wondered afresh.

She was indeed pale Margaret to-night. Cheeks robbed of colour—eyes sunken and too bright. But so lovely in her pallor, so fair a thing that Roland's heart cried for her.

She should not know—that was his thought—doggedly repeated. Until the hour when they could go secretly and be married, she should not know.

Days crawled away, leaden-footed, and unhappy. Roland hunted, but even the good horse between his knees, the gallop across the difficult Worcestershire fences, could not bring more than a passing relief.

He was afraid of dying—of leaving Margaret, and the whole story creeping out—when he could do nothing. He lived in a fume of fret and fear, of indecision and doggedness. All men, as some old proverb says, will make fools of themselves given opportunity, and Roland was doing it now.

He slipped to London often, dreading to find letters at his Club, or that some delay in answering might bring him a letter or telegram to Lyme Regis.

He grew thin, his eyes haggard; there was irritation in mere trifles.

Margaret met him with gentle, cold friendliness, with grave trouble in her sweet eyes. And at every meeting her thoughts leapt up.

It could not be. He had not done this thing. The proof did not come, because it could not.

Yet suspicion feeds upon the heart. A crawling beast, it eats the goodness in us away. Pushed back and back, as the girl, head up, dared it to sap her faith, yet it crawled on again, and there were furtive moments when its gnawing teeth made mark.

If he were so despicable a thing. If he had put a woman from the underworld in her place—that or—Margaret's own secret fear was her best weapon against the evil thing Ralph Knox Harding had loosed upon her.

Weeks—a month. Spring fluttering under the mother earth's heart; birds waking to the summer courtship.

"It is strange I have had no word. And I have written twice."

Roland was going up to London to look for a letter. Perhaps Violet, his wife, was better, and had gone abroad. This period of his waiting might be lengthened indefinitely. It was hideous to him to know that he wished her dead.

We have but one poor life. Why should he be doomed to long for one weak woman's losing of it? "I do not—I will not," he would tell himself.

A little dark man who had watched him leave the station, jumped now into the London train. A man who had come to live in the village, for his health, he said. A taxi sped swiftly on the heels of Roland's. The little dark man lounged outside the Club.

Letters? Yes. The violet-scented envelope, reeking heavily. His name trailing weakly across it.

A scrawl which sent his heart into his mouth.

"All UP now, Roland. Come along and see me. I've a fancy to say good-bye. Greening's right away, won't be back for a month yet.—V."

Dying! He could have struck himself for the flash of relief. Now he could go to Margaret, make his story, and tie her to him by a new marriage. He would never tell her what had been. But he would woo her again. Make her forget the bitter days of estrangement.

Swooping swiftly through sunlit streets, and on his heels the shadower. Down to the dingy house; the blinds were up, and Violet was still alive.

Gertrude, her eyelids pink, opened the door.

"Mrs Greening? Oh, it's you, Mr Roland. I was to let you in. No—she's asleep now, poor thing! Burst a blood-vessel yesterday, but rallied this morning. Mr Greening's cousin is here."

He came in, waiting in the tawdry drawing-room. A bunch of withered violets stood on a table, a penny paper was flung down on the floor as she had left it, the stale scent of the pastilles clung about the stuffy air.

The stout cousin, pleasantly excited by tragedy, came down to him.

"No, you can't see her to-day, Mr Roland. But she told me she expected you, and so, come again to-morrow. You're her cousin, aren't you?"

"We are near relations," he said quietly.

"Yes. Then Greening will understand. Give me your address to ring up. She may be up again to-

morrow. She won't stay in bed directly she plucks up strength at all—they hang on, poor things."

He gave the number of the Club's 'phone, for he must stay in London now for a few days.

The fat cousin was so blatantly respectable, so middle-class in her lugubrious importance. What would she say if she knew that it was his wife who lay ill upstairs? His wife—Lady Mainwaring.

Nothing to do now, but go away. Walking with bent head; and close behind him the shadower.

Back to his Club. The shadower darting off to the nearest office to ring up his Master Shadower. To report success. The Master Shadower, in his turn, getting through to his employer—when he had spied further, from the local tradesmen.

"Yes. We have the address. A Mrs Greening lives there. We understand there is a husband—seldom at home—Mr Greening brought the lady from Malta—antecedents unknown. She is flashy—over-dressed—wears diamonds."

The wires flashed two messages through to Lyme Regis. One from Roland, briefly announcing business in town. The second—

"I have got the proof. Come up to London to-morrow. Wire to me to meet you.—KNOX HARDING."

The gentle evening fell strangely on these storm-tossed beings. On Roland—more weary now than when he had struggled through uncertainty. Turning over explanation in his head. Dreaming of the hour when Margaret would be his again.

She was not suspicious. She would believe in some technical flaw in their marriage. Some little thing,

better made safe. For the rest—he could plead illness. Feared lung trouble, kept from her. He was building up his future happiness on the foundation of a pile of falsehood, but he would not tell his wife the truth. If it were another woman he might have — Margaret might never forgive.

It fell on Ralph Knox Harding, trying to battle down his triumph and call it holy joy. He would expose this man and by exposure send him, chastened, back to his wife. So in the mind he had made for himself, but in his heart rang the words—"Then before my God, if true, I'll go into some sisterhood. There will be no coming back." So in a measure he would have won, and taken the woman he loved back from the man who wronged her.

It fell on Margaret with eyes alight, and no relief of tears with her.

Her wire had gone back. "I do not believe it. But I will come to prove you wrong."

. . . . . .

It was afternoon next day before Roland got his message. It came through in Gertrude's voice.

"The missis is hup. She'd like to see you. She shouldn't be hup, but Miss Johnson is away."

He drove over with a man's nervous fear of illness, really hoping now to find Violet better. If she was up, death could not be near.

But Gertrude's eyes were wet when he opened the door. She shook her head drearily.

"It's jest madness," she said. "Hup an' dressed hup; flyin' in the face of Providence."

"Hup an' dressed up." Propped in a deep chair, ghastly pale, dressed in a gay pink gown, with jewels at her throat and on her wrists.

A pitiful thing, going out bravely, without a whine or complaint.

"Say—Roland—there you are, that's good."

The living find it so hard to believe in death. When Violet spoke, he gave a gasp of relief. If she could speak, get dressed, sit up, the dread summons could not be so near.

"I'm pretty bad," she said, "but better than I was. Cheated the undertaker for a bit, Roland, eh? I say, I don't look a fright, do I? No colour?"

It was pitiful, almost ghastly to hear her. Caring for her looks; smiling at him with her breath coming wheezily through the remnants of a lung.

He told her, steadying his voice, that the pallor suited her; that she had never looked prettier.

"It's just to say good-bye, then," she said, smiling again. "No more bother, Roland, from me. I gave you enough, didn't I? And that wife of yours. What will you do now. Tell me."

He told her his ideas, hating to sit by the living and talk of what he would do when she was dead.

"I say that's all wrong. Tell her the truth." Violet lifted a wasted hand. "Better, Roland. Seems I can see things now, and I know lies never pay. It'll always be a shadow between you. Tell her, Roland—"

He could not, he told her. Margaret was so pure, so good.

How could he tell her when there was hope of keeping the trouble from her, leaving her mind unscathed.

"I still say tell her." Violet gasped a little, asked for champagne, and drank a mere spoonful, as he held the glass to her lips.

Roland had brought her flowers, fruit. She made him put them about, delighting in their fragrance. It

was as if the nearness of death had put evil from her, left her more child than she had ever been.

"Lawdy! If I could have it again," she said, holding up a forced rose. "Again! I know what pays now. Just to make some fellow happy. I'd marry Bill, that wanted me, and I'd live in a bit of a house in the quiet. D'ye think they'll allow anything over there, Roland. It wasn't all my fault. There was that girl—Lily—a rare wrong 'un—she took me out with a pal of hers—a toff—and I but fifteen. I loved pretty things then—they knew it. And after that I grew hard, I didn't care, and—I just got value. I see the worth of all the money now. Who's that out there? Tell her, Roland—the truth."

Gertrude's voice sounded at the door, remonstrating, arguing.

"Yes, tell your wife, Roland, she'll understand," repeated Violet.

"She knows!"

Trumpet-voiced, the lean instrument of justice stood in the door. There was fervour on his face—triumph and bitter anger.

To dare—to dare—this husband of Margaret.

"Now, will you believe! Now, Margaret?" He turned to someone outside.

Roland sprang up, stood stricken—white.

"My God! Margaret here!" he groaned.

"Lawdy!" Violet sat up, forgetting her weakness. "A parson! What's up? Why are they here? It's your wife. And a good thing too—"

"One who has tracked you here, Sir Roland," Knox Harding began.

"Oh, stow it!" Violet interrupted him sharply.

"Is Lady Mainwaring there? Bring her in, I say! Bring her in."

And there in the doorway, for Knox Harding called out, Roland saw Margaret, with horror in her eyes, with hands outstretched as if to ward off a blow—with the last remnants of faith flying from her heart.

"You would not believe. You would not. You see now why Roland leaves you. Where he comes to—who he comes to."

In the dim light they could only see Violet's bright dress; her sparkling jewels.

"Who—oh, a gay thing." Violet mocked him. Her thin, weak fingers reached for a switch; the room was flooded with light.

And then—they saw the face with the greyness of death upon it—the mere case of bones clothed so gaily; they listened to the hoarse whispering voice.

"This is truly dramatic." Roland stood up, furiously angry. "Is this seemly for you, Margaret—to have followed me—here."

"Since it—" she began; then looked again at the dying woman in the chair. "Roland, I would not believe until I saw. So I came myself. I—I am afraid you are ill," she added timidly. "We must go."

"You wouldn't believe— Oh, sakes alive! You saints!" Violet took a gulp of champagne. "This man, whose one thought has been for you—of you—to save you." The hoarse voice rang contemptuously.

"Violet, don't talk," said Roland, dully.

"Oh, to have dared," Knox Harding said, in a low voice. "To leave your wife to come here to your old haunts. Such men as you are beasts, Roland Mainwaring."

"Be still, you," Roland flashed back.

His dark head was flung up, the restraint of months burst bounds, leapt up in a great wave of anger.

"Since you are here, Margaret," he said, "one word before you go."

"I need no words," said Margaret. "For I know now why you left my—to come to—"

"My wife," he said intensely. "To my wife, Margaret. Who did not die in South Africa. And—I found it out two months ago."

There was silence in the small room. Silence—with the woman in the chair watching, her eyes fever-bright, a touch of colour on her grey cheeks, a fever spot of warning.

"Your wife! Your wife!"

Knox Harding cried out, reeled back to the doorway.

To see the sudden wild relief on Margaret's face—the faith coming back again to its citadel. The lines fading from her set mouth.

"Your wife," she said, catching at a chair. "You knew that evening when you came back."

"Yes—and wouldn't tell you." The hoarse whisper commanded silence in its weakness. "Wouldn't, for fear he'd hurt you. My lady—you—that suspect his likes."

In a great rush of joy Margaret understood. Roland had never ceased to love her.

"He's a good sort," the weak voice said, gasping now. "You stick to him—and here, let me look at you, milady, what he loves."

Into the light—tall and fair and proud, great tears upon her cheeks.

"Ay — no wonder he cared so much," Violet muttered. "For you're a lovely thing."'

Hands out—Margaret kneeling suddenly by the sick

woman's side. "Forgive us for coming here—oh, forgive me."

"Parson drove you to it, I'm thinkin'." There was a smile on Violet's lips. "No, don't you touch me now. I ain't fit."

"Yes—let me lift you up. Please!"

The deft hands lifted the poor weak thing, settled the gaudy cushions.

"I'm an awful fright, ain't I? I thought the pink'd give me a bit of colour," said Violet, weakly; she was worn out.

"It does—you look so well; the dress is lovely." Margaret's voice came in quick gasps. It was pitiful—this woman lying back weak and ill. This woman Roland had been suspected for. "Drink some champagne, dear," she said. "Roland—help me with the glass."

The scene seemed photographed in her mind. The man standing by his dying wife, in the square gaudy little room. Dressed in the pink gown which mocked her ghastly cheeks—her labouring breath.

By the doorway, out of the circle of light, stood a man in black. A shadow in the shadows. A man who had lighted on something deeper than the human garden he dug in. Who found emotion outside his life; a spirit of sacrifice he could not understand.

It was to spare Margaret that Roland had held his peace and had created this estrangement. Here, in the man he had dogged and suspected, lay a spirit of purity which his own mind had never compassed. Knox Harding was ashamed. For a space he saw himself stripped of the cloak of self-righteousness, and knew the crude emotions which had driven him on.

It was not the righteous desire to bring Roland back. It was bitterness and baffled love and passion.

"I am ashamed." Head bowed, he moved into the light. "Ashamed of what I have been and done." This to the woman whose breath rattled hoarsely. "It was my doing, and I say I am ashamed."

"Madam—if I—if there is any help to you in a sinner clothed in my cloth—" he finished humbly, standing with bent head.

Violet's face twisted. "Lawdy, no!" she said. "I've been a bad 'un right through. It's no use whining now. If anyone done me good it's poor old Greening, who believed in me. That's what makes one decent, someone who's good. They—mayn't be too hard on me after all—since I'm so hang sorry for the rotter I've been."

"I'll— May I come to see you to-morrow?" Margaret took the fevered, wasted hand.

"Lawdy! You're not angry with me then—'cos I'm here." Violet looked curiously at the lovely face. "It will cheer me up if you would. I've a lot to say to you. I say, don't be too good, y'know. It frightens Roland. So long, milady. Oh, but I'm glad you came here."

"Good-bye, Violet." Very gently, to the frail piece of flesh which defied Death even when he was so close to her.

"Good-bye." Roland, before them all, bent to kiss the grey-white cheek. His eyes were wet.

"So long," she rattled. "So long—not good-bye. It won't be long y'know, but don't be so solemn now, Roly,"—waving her thin hand to them as she coughed and gasped.

The hunter came with them to the door, humbled and abased.

"Margaret—can you forgive? It—was because I loved you so dearly."

Mere simple truth going home to the two who listened.

"I—can forget it, Ralph. Roland—I think he has not been well. Can you?"

"Not yet," said Roland, honestly.

They drove back to Lancaster Gate. Lady Grace was out of town, but the servants lighted fires, made comfort swiftly. Then in the small room downstairs the two stood silent.

Margaret knew now. She had forgiven him. Yet Roland was afraid; he had dragged her down; it was his fault that she was sinner and not saint.

There was a telegram sent on to Margaret from Lyme Regis. Clive Mainwaring was dead, and had left Roland everything. He was rich enough now to keep his palace up.

Margaret lifted her fair head—came close to him—and laid her hands on his. In some moments one sees clearly; the cloaks which veil us are pulled aside, and we can see into working minds and naked hearts. In these minutes Margaret saw all that Roland had felt and suffered; all he had tried to do for her to keep her honour clean.

"Roland, I think you are the noblest man on earth," she said. "But—oh!—why not have told me all this weary time."

"I could not tell you." Insensibly there was a pause before the "you." "You're so good, Madge. In your heart, will you ever forgive me for what I've done to you."

She smiled quietly at him. "Roland—if we are to be true comrades, you and I—I must live in no niche.

Wait, and in a few minutes you will know the secret I have kept. The secret I thought you had found out," she half whispered.

"A secret? Yours! What can there be, Madge?"

"This," she said grimly, and told him. Of her first engagement as a mere child to Herbert Dunne, a man of the world, passionate, careless—loving her with a fervour which she accepted and was dimly afraid of. Then, of how, a week before their wedding, they had started for a motor drive, and a hundred miles from home, late one evening, had broken down. "We were close to a little inn. It was the place you heard Paul mention. And Herbert went in first. The old landlady mistook us for husband and wife—so he said afterwards.

"I did not know or understand—until—he came to me—late; said we were almost married. Swore that in Scotland we were married now. And so—" She dropped her shamed face on her hands. "I—I—whom you call such a saint— He could always make me do as he liked—Roland. I was bewildered—was in his hands.

"We went home early next day; said we had travelled all night. No one knew; but he, Herbert, was with us for four days more—and— Is there need for words, Roland, after my first folly? Wait— We were to have been married in a week. And he—dear Heaven!—was killed motoring down to our house, the day before. He lingered for a week, but never regained consciousness. I could not even see him.

"I was stunned—ashamed to be alive. And—and—Roland, there was a time when I was mad. When I knew what was to come.

"I asked questions—knew all too soon. It would

have killed mother—ruined my life—they thought me broken-down from grief for Herbert. I made them let me go away to Paris. I went to Sister Therése, where I had spent a year finishing. I told her—everything.

" Not one word of blame—Roland—from a woman who was a saint on earth. Nothing but, ' My poor child. My blighted Marguerite.' They let me stay with her—hidden in the convent, until she sent me out when I could stay no longer. I was not of her religion, but she helped me. Got friends of hers to help me.

" She—did not live, Roland—the little one. I fought for life for a week, and heard her whimper; then saw her, a little waxen thing; and then when I was well—she did not whimper any more. She is buried in Paris, with only Marguerite upon the cross above her. It was to her grave I went that day. Now, Roland—here is the woman you have thought a saint. And—if you think it fit—one who is willing to leave you free—to join Sister Therése in the old convent, or go into some Protestant sisterhood, and never trouble you again."

" Margaret—oh, Margaret! " He caught her in his arms. She was as human as he—there was no barrier between them now.

" Oh, my poor sweetheart! How you suffered! And you thought me cur enough to have changed to you because I had found out your little, pitiful story."

" Because I could not think of anything else," she said, resting her cheek against his.

" You are none the less the purest thing on earth," he said gravely. " My rare, pale Margaret.

The bell whirred lightly. He heard a voice in the hall.

" One moment, Margaret! She is dead—I—waited there to see. She died almost before you left the

house. I—stayed with her. And I—give me my punishment. Let me marry you to-morrow. Paul and old Basling witnesses."

To-morrow! He left them by the firelight—hand in hand, forgetting the tragedy of death in their happiness.

"Good-night, sweetheart." It was late when Roland got up. "The hours will drag until the morning."

"Until we are married, Roland; we'll go away all alone." A ripple of laughter crossed Margaret's lips. "And, oh, Roland, it will be good to be your real companion, and not Saint Margaret in a niche. It is not in niches, or kneeling before them, that one knows the real goodness of men and women," she said softly, "the goodness which is human, Roland."

THE END

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